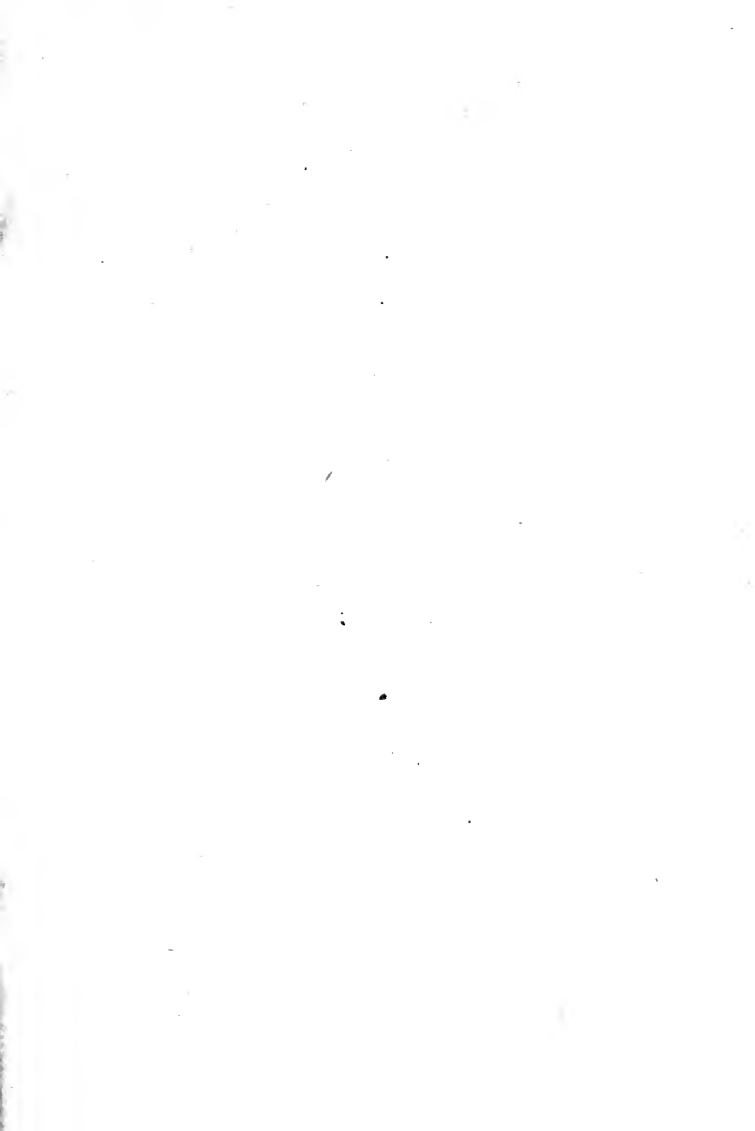






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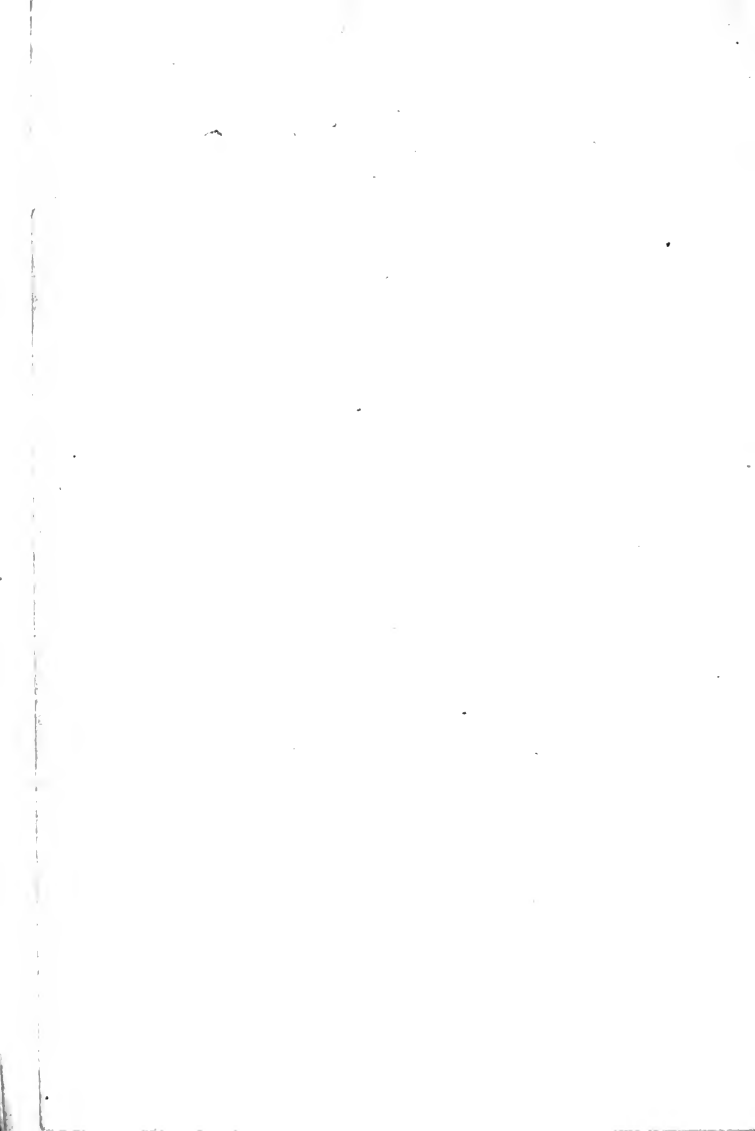
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STEVEN LAWRENCE BY MRS. EDWARDS.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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# STEVEN LAWRENCE, YEOMAN.

BY

MRS. EDWARDS,  
AUTHOR OF "ARCHIE LOVELL."

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IN TWO VOLUMES.  
VOL. I.

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1869.

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# STEVEN LAWRENCE, YEOMAN.

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## CHAPTER I.

A Story without a Moral.

"A FAIR face, Klaus," said Steven Lawrence, thoughtfully—"a face that might well tempt a man to give up the wilderness, forget his gun and his comrade, and all the old landmarks of his life!" And, as he spoke, the yeoman took Miss Fane's photograph from his breast again, and, holding it up before his eyes, examined it long and critically in the fast-sinking sunset light.

Sunset in the tropics: sunset on the outskirts of a Mexican forest—stately, solemn, unrifled by man, as in the days when Cortes and his band first marched, silent with wonder, through the flowering woods and golden sierras of the land that they had come to conquer! What a chaos of noble colour, what an Eden of blossom and of odour, what royal prodigality of untrammelled life was around Steven in this moment when he resolved to discard his fond mistress, Nature, and return to the larger cares, the scantier pleasure of civilization! The spot where the hunters had encamped themselves for the night was at the height of some three or four thousand feet above the level of the sea, and a glowing sweep of lowland country—yellow maize

fields and towering maguey intermingling with orchards, villages, and gardens—stretched away, league beyond league, before them, until it broke into blue haze at the foot of the snow-capped range of distant Cordilleras. On one hand, bordering the narrow path or deer track along which the hunters had travelled, a dense undergrowth of cactus and prickly pear, matted together with wild rose, honeysuckle, and flowering vine, formed an impenetrable barrier to the forest; on the other, through tangled arches over-roofed by bamboo and palm, by glossy-leaved banana or drooping boughs of the white-blossomed dogwood,\* could be caught long vistas of woodland shade; the turf ankle-deep in verbena, white and purple iris, and a thousand exotic orchids of nameless hues and beauty. Aloes, with their candleabra-like spikes of bloom; tree ferns in all the marvellous grace of their giant fronds; orange and red gladioli; and a very wilderness of rope-plants, passion flowers and lycopodiums clothed the ground to the verge of a ravine which, at seventy or eighty feet distant, fell abruptly into the valley. The soft west wind was laden to intoxication with odour. Myrtle, citron, and peach groves; the milk-white datura; the waxen flowers of the plant which the Indians, in their language, call, "Flower of the Heart," all lent their sweetness to the voluptuous incense of the hour: while (as if no sense should be left unconquered) a solitary mocking-bird, close at hand beside the hunters' camp, filled the whole forest-side with the echoes of her plaintive and most musical mimicry.

And to all this wealth of nature by which he was surrounded—to forest and valley, smiling lowland and distant mountain—Steven Lawrence was insensible.



His heart was away—away by a low white homestead on a bleak sea-shore: a Kentish homestead with cool winds blowing from the sea, a grey sky over head, and the fresh, wild smell from seaweed on the beach mingling with the homely sweetness of wall-flowers and budding lilacs along the garden-walks. Steven Lawrence's heart was in the home where he had not been since he was a boy—the home whose hearth he had forsaken in his boyish jealousy, and on which the fire of a stranger burnt now. Home! What were perfume-laden winds, fruits and flowers chasing each other in unbroken succession throughout the months—what was all this affluence of alien colour and sound and odour compared to the magic of that short word?

It was mid-April, and he could picture to himself how the old farm, every field, every rood in every field, of which he knew, must look. The young corn sprinkling its tender verdure athwart the fallows; the potatoes showing their dusky ridges on the southern hill-side; the whitening orchard with the daffodils in the grass; the copse, where the wood-pigeons must be building, and the larch and maple putting forth their glistening buds; the bare wych-elm and the sallow willows by the brook—he could see it all!—minutely, vividly, as only a man to whom Nature is the great passionate reality of life ever sees opening buds, and whitening orchards, and early-tinted fallows! Was the five-acres sowed with wheat or barley this year? he wondered; and was the Vicar's Close (never, from time immemorial, belonging to any member of the Established Church) kept pasture still? He could hear the lowing of the cattle as they came home along the sandy sea-ward road at milking-time; could mark the lazy neap-tide crawling in mid-

way across the sands; could see the light of a wood fire blazing cheerfully through the bay-window of the farm-parlour; could see the white cloth spread; himself coming home, tired, from his day's work, along the garden walk and in the porch;—but now imagination, not memory, worked, and the picture grew less distinct; in the porch a slender girlish figure, a tender smile upon a beautiful mouth, two little hands outstretched to clasp his neck, and then . . . Steven Lawrence gave a great sigh, came back with a start to Mexico again, and found the face of which he dreamed smiling to him from the bit of card-board in his hands.

"A fair face," he repeated once more and aloud. "If such things were at all in your way, Klaus, I would ask you to take a look at it before you help me with your advice."

"Advice!" repeated a deep voice, slowly—a voice in which, although more than twenty years had been passed away from the fatherland, the good old German gutturals were grafted, with an effect which I shall not attempt to reproduce, upon a broad New England accent. "A man of your age, in love, to ask advice of a man of mine! Give me the picture, Steven, and I shall say all that you want me to say of it—an angel face, myosotis eyes, rose-and-milk skin, a pair of lips like cherries—everything that a man in love would have his mistress possess, but advice—no! Advice between friends should be the result of reason, and love, from the beginning of it to the end, is a passion by its very nature divorced from reason. If I advised at all—*gehe!*—let me see her! When you are away from me I would like, anyhow, to know the exact form in

which your per—your happiness, Steven, your happiness, was accomplished.”

And old Klaus stretched out his brown sinewy hand—a hand not much accustomed to handle ware so frail—and took the little vignette photograph over which Steven Lawrence was still intently poring.

As he held it in silent scrutiny for some moments, a flood of orange light, the transient after-glow of the tropics, fell suddenly across the clearing where the old German and Steven had encamped for the night, and set forth in clearest relief the figures of the two men—of the man who had lived and loved, and whose tired heart knew the worth of both possessions, and the man before whose hopes life and love lay outstretched in gilded perspective still, and whose strong heart leaped with passion as he looked forward to his own share in both. What a contrast outwardly between the two! How easy for one to hold love and beauty so cheap; how natural for the other to consider them as purest gold! What could poor old Klaus—at this moment the thought struck Steven—what could a man like this have ever known of love? At five and twenty could that hard grey face of his have been young? Could any woman have kissed his lips with love? Could he ever, save out of musty German books, have learnt the crude philosophy which had turned all one side of his honest, sterling heart to gall?

Klaus is a big-made, ridiculously angular man; tall in reality, but not looking so, from the disproportionate size of his hands and feet, and the awkward, crane-like fashion in which his head is set upon a pair of sloping shoulders. His face is a wonderful face: the skin tanned, freckled, and lined to an extent that

makes his own statement of having been "lily fair" when he was a boy, the most wildly incredible of all Klaus's stories: the high, projecting forehead seamed with furrows; the pale blue eyes deep set, void of any perceptible eyebrow or eyelash and with that peculiar half-scowling expression in them common to men whose lives have been spent, whether on sea or land, in confronting sun and wind and storm unsheltered. No vestige of hair is to be seen on his upper lip or chin, and this peculiarity alone, in a life where every man goes bearded, gives something weird to the expression of the poor old fellow's face—an expression heightened by his thin, keen-cut nose, always carried aloof, as he says of himself, like a fox's in search of prey, and the hard compressed lips rarely parted, save twice in the twenty-four hours to eat, or, almost more rarely still, to speak. A sparse tuft of hair, of a wan, clay colour, clothes the extreme top of Klaus's skull: the forehead, the temples, the back region of the head, are perfectly bare. "My hair has too often come off after jungle fever to offer to grow again now," he explains sometimes. "I have just enough left to be scalped by, when those *verfluchte* Indians get hold of me at last. Could the finest lovelocks that ever grew serve the purpose better?" Such is Klaus's exterior.

Steven Lawrence is an Englishman of seven or eight and twenty, Saxon-looking in the extreme, even in Indian mocassins, red flannel shirt, and Mexican sombrero. Of his face, inasmuch as the feature which gives the key-note to the rest is masked by beard, all I shall say here is that he has a broad smooth forehead whose fairness contrasts quaintly with the sienna brown of his sunburnt cheeks; crisp dark hair growing low

upon the temples, as you may have seen in a tapestried portrait of Henri Quatre in the Louvre; a nose somewhat too short to belong to the aristocratic British type, but clean cut as a statue's, and forming in profile an unbroken line from the forehead; gleaming white teeth that show, in spite of the beard, whenever he speaks or smiles, and a pair of well-opened resolute blue eyes. You could hardly look into his face and doubt that he possessed, at least, a manly mouth and chin. Nature surely would not commit the anomaly of allying positive weakness with that sturdy head, those bold blue eyes of his. But what of intellectual, what of moral strength? I pause until I can bring poor Steven before you, shorn, to answer that question. He is stalwart and tall, over six feet in mocassins, broad chested, lithe of limb, thoroughly, unconsciously graceful, as only human creatures who have lived, as he has, an unfettered, half-savage life can ever be now-a-days. As he lies outstretched upon the turf—his rifle at his side, his handsome face, half in shadow, half lit up by this orange glow, as he turns it round to his companion—he looks for very certain a man: a man whose physical proportions a Greek sculptor of old would not have disdained as a model. The well-set, crisp-curled head; the broad, low forehead; the level glance of eye, the throat, the limbs, might all have belonged to the race among whom the gods dwelt; and of mind, of soul—well, with the eager expression that his features wear just now, there is enough even of these upon the yeoman's face, perhaps, for a Greek.

Easy to imagine, I repeat, that the love and beauty poor old Klaus holds so cheap would be considered by

Steven Lawrence, in this fresh spring-time of his manhood, as the purest gold!

"The face is a handsome one, Steven: no doubt concerning that much: the face is a handsome one. As the picture is uncoloured, I'm disqualified of course from speaking of the rose-and-lily skin, the myosotis eyes, but——"

"But the expression of the face?" interrupted Steven Lawrence impatiently, as he took back the photograph from Klaus's hand. "What do I care for roses and lilies, and myo— hang it all! what do I care for a market-gardener's list of beauties, when I am speaking of a woman's face—a woman's face that I love? I may say it, though I haven't seen her for near upon a dozen years. The eyes may be black, or blue, or brown, I will swear they are eyes that could love: the lips may be rosy-red or not—they are lips that could speak brave words, and give a man brave kisses, and if I can win them they shall be mine! Now, Klaus, I have spoken out the plain truth to you at last." And he took another fond look at the photograph, then put it carefully within a letter—a letter well worn and creased, as if it had been read and re-read, and hid it away again within his breast.

Without answering a word the old German rose, his rifle in his hand, and walked off to examine the stakes of the two little mustang horses that, at twenty or thirty yards distance, were tethered out to graze. He then carefully, and with a master hand, turned the savoury haunch of venison that was roasting for their evening meal across the embers of a clear wood fire; finally took out a pouch of tobacco from his pocket, twisted up a cigarito, lit it, and came back to Steven's

side. In the five minutes that had elapsed since he went away, the tropical after-glow had faded into night. Already a white full moon was shining behind the crest of the opposite palm-covered hills; already great Orion was saluting the Southern Cross through the transparent ether. The thickets were sparkling with fire-flies; the cardinals and mocking birds were hushed; the toll of the campanero alone resounded, plaintive and clear, like an Old World village bell, through the forest.

"The haunch is browning to a turn, Steven, and smells good exceedingly," said old Klaus. "Have you an appetite to-night?"

"Have I not!" answered Steven, heartily. "I was just thinking, as you came back, Klaus, that my hunger was prodigious. We haven't eaten since a little past sunrise, and then, to speak honestly, I was ill-satisfied: three partridges, a quail, and a dozen of pheasant eggs isn't over much of a breakfast between two men like you and me. How long will it be, do you think, before the food is ready?"

"A quarter of an hour," said Klaus; "time for my cigarito, and for the advice which you may remember I have not given you yet. Do I advise you to make your way across to Tampico, or go down straight away to Vera Cruz? That's about what you want me to talk to you of, Steven, isn't it?"

"Klaus," answered the Englishman, "one thing is certain: sooner or later I *must* return to the old country; not, as you will say, because of this fancy for a woman's face—if Dora Fane had never written to me or sent me her picture at all, I must go back just the same. This life of ours—well, no man knows better

than you how well the life suits me. I've no education; I haven't I suppose, what men in cities call brains; and a year ago I should have laughed at any man who had told me I should give up deer-stalking and quail-shooting for the old English life, the plough and the harrow, the sowing and the reaping, from which I ran away when I was a boy. Money perhaps, Klaus, quite as much as love, if I speak the truth, is what takes me back. While my uncle lived, while young Josh held the farm, and while I was a beggar, I loathed the thought of the dull village life, the daily farm work, the comfortable old house, the place in the meeting-house, from which the lad's inopportune legitimacy had ousted me. Now that I know these things are mine, that three or four hundred of good sovereigns are to be made a year out of my own land, if I return and put my shoulder (as the shoulders of all my forefathers have been) to the plough, I begin to think my duty lies there, on my own bit of land, and that the old village-monotony, meeting-house and all, is what I was born and intended for."

"Even without the myosotis—" began Klaus, holding his cigarito between his fingers, and looking full at Steven's face.

"Even without a woman being mixed up in it at all," interrupted Steven, quickly. "And if my-o-so-tis means blue——, as I suppose, you're wrong altogether. Dora Fane, to the best of my recollection, had eyes like sloes."

"Never," said the old German, decisively. "On that point I am certain, my friend. The woman from whom that photograph was taken had never black eyes. Brown, possibly, or hazel, or any shade of blue you



choose, but black—never! Are you sure, now, you are in love with the right woman, Steven?" he added. "How many years is it since you saw this Dora last? Are you certain you'd know her if you met her in the streets of Vera Cruz next week?"

"I should know the woman from whom this photograph was taken if I met her anywhere," answered Steven, promptly. "Of Dora Fane, as she used to be—well if you bring me to exact facts, of Dora Fane as she used to be, my recollections are just about as confused as possible. I was eighteen when I left home, and she, by Jove! Klaus, she was within a year, for certain, of my own age."

"Which makes her now?"

"Seven and twenty, at least! Is it possible—and the picture would give you the idea of a woman in her first prime, twenty at the outside! Well, never mind; she'll be a better mate for me—fitter for the sort of life she'll have to lead as my wife. I never thought of her as that kind of age, though! Eighteen—well, say she was two years younger, which she wasn't, than me—sixteen and ten would be twenty-six, at the youngest. I'm pleased you understand, Klaus, pleased that it should be so. An experienced woman of six and twenty knows better how to love than a flighty girl of eighteen; still I never did think of Dora Fane before as of that kind of age, I must confess."

"And there was some sort of love-making going on between you, young as you were, Steven? Before you left home, you and the girl had looked upon each other like sweet-hearts, I suppose, already?"

"Not exactly," said Steven, after remaining silent for a minute or two, while he ransacked his memory;

"indeed, I can't positively say I ever spoke to her a dozen times in my life. Dora, as I have told you, was a poor relation and dependent of the Squire's, half play-mate, half governess, of little Katharine Fane, his step-daughter; and—well, as far as I recollect, not averse to the attentions of the different young men about the neighbourhood. There was young Hoskins, the doctor, I know; and Smith, the curate, used to meet her when she walked out with the child; not to speak of myself, whom of course she only noticed when there was no better fellow by, and——"

"Young Hoskins, and the curate, and you, when there was no better fellow by!" exclaimed Klaus, flinging away the end of his cigarito. "And of *this* woman—this woman who, a dozen years ago, carried on love affairs by the half-score—you are madly, over head and ears, enamoured? Why, 'tis sheer downright idiocy—a thing to put yourself into the doctor's hands for. What do you remember of her? that she was no better conducted than she should have been before she had well done with being a child. What do you know of her? that, by your own showing, she is a woman getting on for thirty years of age, and who, in all these years, has not found a man fool enough to marry her yet."

"I remember of her," said Steven, quietly, "that she was a pretty delicate-faced child, neither worse nor better, I suppose, than other children of her age. I know of her that she has grown up like this!" He laid his hand for an instant upon his breast pocket, where the photograph lay. "That she has written me a letter showing that, during all these years—years during which, the Lord knows, I have been faithful to

nothing! she has continued true to her childish fancy for me (one of the Fanes true to me, Steven Lawrence!), and that, as soon as I find myself back in England, I shall ask her in plain words to be my wife. She was giddy, if you choose, when she was a girl; she is nearer thirty than twenty; no man has married her. I will! The thing is settled, Klaus, for good or for evil, as far as I am concerned. Let us talk of other matters."

"After supper, Steven; we have ten minutes yet before the haunch is ready, and those ten minutes we'll devote to the discussion of love. After to-night, friend, till the day I lose you, let not the sorry subject of woman or of marriage pass our lips again! I have no thought of changing you, you know I don't believe you're a man likely to alter in whatever you've made up your mind to do, but I should like to tell you—tell you," hesitated old Klaus, with an odd sort of shyness, "a love story of—a friend of mine, say. It happened twenty-five years ago come next fall, and I've never opened my lips concerning it to mortal man or woman before to-night. I always thought I should take it with me, unspoken, to the grave, but you see, Steven, I've loved you as a son—no, I hate the word; a son implies a mother—I've loved you with a feeling such as men don't often have for each other, I guess, out of the wilderness, and if any words of mine *could* put wisdom into your head, I'd speak them—let alone the pain it would cost myself. You'll hear my story, lad? Soh! Well, then, I must think a bit first. I'm no great speaker. I don't know how to spin a yarn of plain meaning into three volumes or so of fine-drawn stuff and sentiment like a paid romancer. What I've

got to say would go printed into one paragraph—about as much as the country paper takes for a giant gooseberry or a shower of frogs when politics are scarce. Still I must think a bit first. Five and twenty years (about what you've lived since you were first set upon your feet) is a longish gap in a man's life—long, I mean, to remember a dream after—and this was a dream, Steven! a young man's dream, such as you are dreaming at this minute. All that it concerns you to hear about is the awakening. You've only to look into your own heart, I reckon, to imagine the first part better than I could describe it now."

He stopped abruptly, and leant his head down for a few moments between his hands, then raised himself, stiff and motionless, to his former position, and with the red glow from the distant fire faintly shining at intervals upon his face, told his love-story—a story destined to be recalled pretty often to the memory of Steven Lawrence during the years to come.

"It was in the old country, my friend, that the thing began, at a town upon the Rhine—whose name doesn't matter—a town south of Frankfort, where men's hearts, in their youth, are generous as the wine they drink, and where the women for centuries past have borne the reputation of beauty. The girl my friend loved was a type of their beauty at its highest: a marble bust; wide-open eyes, set far apart under a fair and womanly forehead; sun-coloured hair; white arms; a carriage at once lissom and firm, yielding and majestic—*mein Gott!* why do I enlarge on such a theme?—a type of the women, I suppose, who, since the world began, have lured men on ever by the shortest road to perdition! My friend had passed from

boyhood into manhood in the same street with her, and his passion had grown with his growth, strengthened with his strength; so, when he was three and twenty, the girl nineteen, they were engaged. There was equality of birth, equality of poverty between them; and one day it occurred to my friend that it might be a manlier life to work for the woman he loved in a new country than starve with her on his good college education, and a certain foolish prefix he had before his name, in the old one. So, after a little tender hesitation on the part of his betrothed, he put his Greek and Latin (his nobility too) for ever aside, and started with the small patrimony he possessed, to New Brunswick, where some distant relations of his family had already settled. In two years' time he was master of a farm, small but well stocked, and prosperous; a comfortable home to which to take his bride; and he returned to the fatherland to fetch her.

"She met him: she fell upon his neck as he landed from the river steamboat; and in a week their marriage-day was fixed. I was not . . . my friend was not, of a jealous or suspicious character. He was plain—your English word describes him better than any in our language—plain of face, plain of character; where he loved, he loved; where he trusted, he trusted; and where he was betrayed, he was betrayed!" added Klaus, his voice sinking into a hollow, bitter imitation of a laugh. "There was no *unsinn* of any kind, no shilly-shally about the man—in this like you, I think, Steven. What he did, he did; and he loved this woman wholly, with a love that put the possibility of doubt or misgiving out of the question. And they were married.

"There were village tales, both before and after

his wedding-day, reaching my friend's ear, of an attachment that had taken place during his absence between his betrothed and a cousin of his own, a man with whom he had been at college, and whom he looked upon and loved as his nearest friend. He laughed at them; repeated them openly to his bride and to his friend; invited the man to his marriage feast; pressed his hand more warmly than he pressed the hand of father or of mother when he left Germany; and a year later, when, like himself, his cousin had given up the old country and came out to Brunswick to try his fortune, received him into his own house there, and gave him the welcome of a brother.

"Why do I linger? One day, late in the fall—the maples were reddening, I remember, the hickory-leaves like gold—my friend came home from his work at night as usual; and found himself betrayed. His wife had left him. I don't know how such things affect men in cities," said old Klaus huskily, "men who don't believe in over-much, who don't stake their happiness on one more than another out of the hundred of things which make up the occupation of their lives. This man, you see, without a second's preparation, had lost all—his life, his hope, his religion! All. He stared blankly about the little sitting-room . . . her work, her book, on the table—a bunch of flowers that he gave her yesterday on the mantelshelf; then he walked upstairs, as quiet to outward appearance as you are now, took his pistols from the place where they lay by the bedside and walked off to the nearest river station, six miles from his farm, and the route, as he was told on the road, that the lovers had taken. . . .

" . . . . If I had come upon them, then and there, mark you, Steven, with my passion at white heat, I'll stake high that I should have made short work with them both. I'd no thought of calling him out to fight. I wasn't in a state of mind to think of honour or of cowardice. Quiet and calm though I kept outwardly, I was mad: thirsting with a madman's rage for my revenge. And here's the luck of things! If I had found them then, I *must* have gone through the rest of my life red-handed—no doubt of that, and it wouldn't have been a matter of conscience at all, but of sheer physical necessity. If I had seen her face—the lily face with its meek eyes looking into his as they once looked into mine—what choice would have been left me (you can answer, you know what love is) in the matter?

"Well, I say, luck decides all things, and mercifully for me more than for them, perhaps, I did not come upon them at once. The man who told me they had gone away by the river misled me purposely; and it was not till a fortnight later—there were few railroads in those days, you know—that I found myself close upon their track at last at a certain town down in Vermont. They had left this town—I wish to say no names—for a village, so I learnt at the hotel, a league or so distant down the lake, and I had only to go on by the five o'clock boat that afternoon and find them.

"The five o'clock boat. There were three hours to pass away before the steamer left, and instead of going to the bar of the hotel, and deadening myself to the level of a brute, with brandy, as it had been my habit to do during the last fortnight, something moved

me to walk straight away out of the town into the fields. It was the late autumn weather, as I have said; yellow, sunshiny weather, with only a ring of sharpness to make the air more sweet. I walked along, unconscious what direction I took, to the outskirts of a wood, a mile and a half, may be, from the town, and sitting down on a new-fallen block of log-wood, took out my pipe and lit it. The cat-birds were calling, the woodpeckers hammering in the woods, the squirrels darting to and fro in the branches, the lizards chasing the insects in the sun, with the sort of joy I've since observed dumb creatures show just before the winter comes; and something in their ignorant happiness smote me. I thought of the woods by the Rhine, where Franz and I used to go when we were boys. I remembered once, after a fall I had, how the lad, younger and weaker than I was, had carried me to the nearest village, and set off alone through the snow and darkness to bring my mother to my bed. I thought of our play at school, our freaks at college together; and then, with a sudden horror, I remembered what he had done, and what I had got on my soul to do to-night! An intense pity, not for her, not for him, but for myself, came like a flood upon my heart. What! I thought, with the world full of sunshine, with these dumb creatures, and the woods and fields full of joyous life, *I* was to be a castaway? With stained hands, and soiled conscience, with memory from which all my past fair youth must perforce be blotted, I must drag out whatever number of years it should still be my curse and my unutterable misery to live?

"Up till now I hadn't reasoned, you understand,



Blind, senseless, animal passion, had been all that had moved me. In this minute I was a man again. Yes, thank the Lord!" cried old Klaus, fervently, "I was a man! I took no thought then for the future. I thought neither of my disgraced home, and how I should have to live there solitary, nor of the world's opinion—no, nor of them, and of the life that they would live together. One thing only I resolved—to let their guilt be on their own souls, and take no portion of it upon mine. Not for a woman's falseness would I give up something more precious to me than all the marble necks and scarlet lips the world contained—my own unspotted conscience. I wasn't religious then more than you've known me, not with lip-religion, Steven; but in that moment, I believe, as firmly as I believe there is a God above, that His voice spoke to me. Would a little yellow sunshine, the sight of these grey squirrels in the trees have taken away madness like mine, unless He had willed it so?

"Well, in spite of everything I said, I'm spinning out a yarn that would fill a volume, after all; and something in the smell of the meat assures me it isn't far off being ready. I can finish it all short, now. I returned; and from that day I speak of till the day when I chanced to hear she was dead, close upon eight years afterwards, I never heard nor spoke her name again. There were men, I know, who said I acted with a poor spirit, and others, that I showed a deuced deal more worldly sense than could have been expected of me; but whatever they said, you may believe, concerned me little. To a man suffering what I suffered, there are neither smaller sufferings nor smaller

shames. Two years, for very dogged obstinacy, I dragged my life on at my farm—slept in the same bed, ate at the table where she had been at my side! Then I sold everything—there wasn't over and above much to sell: things hadn't prospered with me since she left—and became, as you have seen me, a wanderer on the face of the earth. I haven't, as you know, grown into a man-hater. I have had mates I have liked, one or two friends, besides you, whom I have loved; perhaps, taking all into account, I've led as good a life as the men who live cribbed up like Christians, with a wife and children and all the other blessings of life, in cities.

"Still, Steven, still," said the old man putting his rough hand abruptly to his breast, as if a pain had smitten him, "there's been *something* wanting to me always. She was part of my flesh and of my spirit, you see, and as a matter of common nature I've never been to say the same since she was taken from me. And now I come to the moral of all that I've been trying to tell you. As long as the world lasts, and while men are what they are, they must marry, I suppose; I'm not gainsaying that, or setting up my sorry bit of experience against a rule that the world for a good many thousand years has found to answer better than any other. You're not a boy any more, and when you get home you'll want a wife to keep your house, and bring up your children, and set a neat dinner before you and your friends at Christmas—"

"And a wife I mean to have, please God!" interpolated Steven, firmly.

"But you don't need to give over more than what is absolutely needful: your honour, your fireside peace,

your children's name—enough, God knows!—into her hands. You don't need to put down your heart for her to tread upon, your reason for her to blind and lead astray, your passionate blind worship for her to make a mock of! Not one man in ten thousand, perhaps," said old Klaus, "is capable of loving so. The ten thousand are the men to marry. For him—"

"For him, Klaus?" said Steven, as the old hunter hesitated.

"Well, Steven, I've got so far, and now I'm a fool. I don't know what to say. For him—don't let him do as I did, that's all! Don't let him go mad for a white neck and meek eyes and snow-soft hand, and never see that they are a wanton's! That the lips were never his, that the eyes lied every time they smiled at him—the hand—"

He got up, mechanically raising his rifle from the ground with him, and leaned upon it motionless for a few minutes; then he turned his face away from Steven and brushed his sleeve across it hastily. "Steven," he said at last, in an altered, strangely softened voice, "I'll tell you what I've thought at times—watching by the fire at night, you understand, or listening, afraid to sleep for the grizzlies, for the cry of the goat-suckers, to tell me that morning was at hand upon the hills: quiet times like these, when something better than the mere passions and discontents of a man's own heart speak aloud to him—I've thought of her, not as my engaged bride, not as my wife, but as she was in her innocence, a little maid of twelve running home from school and laughing back at me across her shoulder in the summer twilight, and felt sure that if there is a life after this (a better one, mind: that backsliding

after death is a doctrine against all teaching of nature to my understanding), that woman, white as on her bride-day, must be mine there! A superstition, you'd say, like what the Indians hold of their happy hunting-grounds, or the Mahommedan of his houris, but I wouldn't thank the preacher that would make so much certain to me. What! I've thought, when every winter's snow can bring the dead boughs through to a new April, must it be too high a miracle that death should bring a man's buried love, green and undefiled, into his bosom again? I've thought this, Steven. I think it still. I am not utterly desolate."

This was the ending of poor Klaus's sermon. As he turned and walked slowly away towards the fire, Steven Lawrence watched him, and a flush of eager feeling rose over the young man's face. "And so the story bears no moral after all," he thought. "Dis-honoured in his youth, alone in his age, the thought of the woman who betrayed him is still the best remembrance of this world that the old man possesses, the foundation of whatever hope he has for the next. Why, with no higher luck than his, the venture, on his own showing, is worth making. Better suffer with a man's suffering than be happy with an animal's happiness, as I have been till now."

An opinion which a very short experience of civilized life was destined greatly to modify.

## CHAPTER II.

### Fresh Violets.

STEVEN LAWRENCE held staunchly to his determination. Five days later old Klaus, with a weighty

heart and dim eyes, was standing alone, watching an outward-bound ship from the quay at Vera Cruz, and one severe May evening, after a quick run of twenty-three days, the 'Oneida,' with Steven Lawrence on board, was steaming up the Solent on her way to Southampton harbour.

I use the word severe intentionally. To men fresh from meridional sun, as were all the passengers on board the 'Oneida,' this "wind of God," with its accompaniments of leaden sky and damp searching mists, was more intensely chilling than Christmas snow and frost, with a stiller atmosphere, would have been. West Indians coming for the first time to England wrapped their great blanket-cloaks round their ears and shoulders, and with blue lips and sinking hearts exchanged remarks together upon the inhuman climate of the country to which their curiosity or their business was bringing them. Englishmen returning, many of them after long exile, home, were sensible that to dream of dear old England under the voluptuous heaven of the tropics is a very different thing to having the east wind of dear old England blowing with oblique cruelty in one's teeth. The captain looked cold, and gave his commands to the call-boy in a rasping short voice and with compressed lips, as though anxious to get as little fog and wind as possible down his throat; the call-boy, a poor little shivering Portuguese, piped out the orders, through his blue swollen fingers, down below; the man at the helm was forced, every quarter of an hour, to call another hand to the wheel while he beat his own numbed arms back to sensation across his chest; the crew, a motley collection of Englishmen and Spaniards, Creoles, Portuguese

and Mexicans, stood huddled together to leeward, while they warmed themselves, in anticipation, at cheery tavern fires in Southampton and Portsmouth. Only one man besides the captain and the call-boy had courage enough to keep undauntedly upon the bridge; and this man was Steven. But Steven, in addition to his unusual robustness of constitution, had more in his heart, probably, than any other man on board the 'Oneida.' With love, with keen expectation, acting from the brain upon the circulation a man is not only mentally callous to external accident of rain or cold; he is physically shielded from them. To the shivering West Indians, England was simply a mart in which so many affairs had to be transacted in the shortest possible time; to the Englishmen, landmen and sailors alike, it was the good old country, of course, but the good old country seen from a thoroughly chilly and prosaic point of view: a harbour for a fortnight, a goal of rest after years of exile, a market in which so much coffee and sugar had to be disposed of before returning to a country fit for human beings to breathe in. To Steven alone England was an El Dorado! This leaden sky, yonder pale grey strip of land, were the sky and land encompassing all his desire! He was returning to his own hearth, his own bit of land from which long years had parted him, and to the woman who was to be his wife there. With his blood pulsating hot and fast through his veins, what did it matter to him whether the wind blew from the east or the west? He was going home, and to Dora Fane. English shores looked fresh and fair as ever, he thought—small, though: how dwarfed everything had grown! why, the Solent that to his boyish heart had looked

so sorrowfully wide when he was sailing away ten years ago, was but a little stream to him now that he had lived beside the rivers of the New World. The sight of English roofs and spires affected him almost as though they had been familiar friends. He could scarce dispossess himself from the idea that some face he knew *must* be among the crowd of faces that thronged to watch the arrival of the 'Oneida' in the Southampton docks; and the first chill he had felt that day was when the boat stopped, and he realised definitely that there was no welcome ready for him from any one!

His arrival in England was a matter of the most thorough indifference to all mankind—save porters interested in luggage—he was more utterly alone than he had ever been in Mexican forest or the savannahs and prairies of the west. Does a man, feverish with hope, ever come back to his own country without some such childish disappointment taking away the first keen edge of his excitement as he lands? He gets over it in an hour, of course, but I don't think he ever returns to the flush of happiness with which he watched the white streaks on the cliffs grow more vivid, the roofs and spires assume shape, the crowd upon the pier become each a distinct and individual human face. Landing is like writing the first line of your poem; modelling the first outline of your clay: it puts a dream into form—and breaks it.

Falling in with the crowd, Steven was borne along to the Custom-house; thence, after seeing his luggage to the station, he went to the post-office, and found, to his immense delight, a letter in Miss Fane's hand awaiting him there. He carried it with him into the

coffee-room of Radley's hotel; then, with epicurean intention of eking out his pleasure as long as possible, warmed himself beside the blazing fire, and ordered his dinner before opening it. Glossy, gilt-initialled paper, an ambrosial smell, half of roses, half of Russian leather, greeted his senses as he broke open the envelope.

"My dear Mr. Lawrence," it began. "My." The letter he had received with the photograph was only "Dear." What a world of advancement his imagination saw in the pronoun! "We are all so *very* pleased to hear of your proposed return. The Squire says he is sure, with every belief in Dawes's honesty, that you will make a good twenty-five per cent,—*or fifty*, I forget which, and he is not here for me to ask—more out of the farm, when you take it in your own hands.

"What can you mean when you say 'you fear you will not see much of us?' Do you not know that our house is within two miles of Ashcot, and that we shall see you just as often as you choose to walk over and call on us? Katharine and I are staying in town now with Mrs. Dering, and I write this note, sending it, *as you ask me*, to the post-office, Southampton, to say that we all hope you will come and see us in Hertford Street, number 122A, directly you return. I make out from Bradshaw that, leaving Vera Cruz on April the 25th, you will reach England about the 20th of May; but would you mind writing directly you land at Southampton, and then we shall know exactly when to expect you? I am glad you like the photograph. I have one, on glass, of you, that you gave me, do you remember, when you were a boy? How changed



you must be—hélas! must not that be true of both of us?

“Arabella and Katharine (she is a grown-up girl, you know, now, engaged to be married to Lord Petres, and a celebrated London beauty) send very kind remembrances, and I am, dear Mr. Lawrence, sincerely yours,

“DORA FANE.”

Dinner was upon the table at the exact moment that he reached the signature, for Miss Fane's handwriting was lady-like, and Steven's literary powers slow. The sight of a grand cold sirloin of English beef, and a dish of browned potatoes, backed by strong English ale in the pewter, touched the yeoman's heart with irresistible strength of association. And, sitting down at once, his table comfortably drawn up beside the fire, he commenced a meal which would not have disgraced one of Homer's heroes—a meal at which even the waiters of Radley's, accustomed to men's hunger after sea-voyages, looked on open-eyed, and holding their table-napkins tight with wonder.

At the first moment of reading Dora Fane's letter, he had been sensible that some subtle defect, he knew not exactly what, in its tone, had jarred upon him cruelly; as his dinner went on, the honest malt cheering his heart, the ruddy fire putting new warmth into his veins, he felt assured, not a trace of his fasting dissatisfaction left in him, that it was the kindest, the modestest letter ever penned by a woman's hand. After his meat came rhubarb tart, followed by cheese and radishes, then by a dish of spice nuts, and a bottle of hotel port; and, by the time Steven had made

good progress with his dessert, he felt himself fifty times more in love with Dora Fane than ever. It had been an affair of the imagination hitherto, he said to himself, but now——

He could not, as he felt inclined, open, before men's eyes in a coffee-room, the locket which held her picture (he had bought the trinket in Vera Cruz, and wore it, not as civilised men wear such things, upon his watch-chain, but jealously hidden in his waistcoat pocket); but he could hold the paper again that her little hand had newly touched—could feast his eyes upon the words her heart had bade her write! And as he did so, holding the note between him and the fire, yet not actually reading it—reading, in any form, was not a predilection of Steven's—a postscript which, in his first agitation, or on the appearance of dinner, he had contrived to miss, arrested his attention.

"If you can, telegraph to me from Southampton the exact hour at which we may expect you in Hertford Street, and I will be there to receive you.—D. F."

Dora Fane waiting for him—expecting his message, perhaps, at this moment—and he, like the savage, like the animal that he was, sitting here before the fire, in stupid enjoyment of his wine and nuts, unheeding of her commands. He got up, to the benefit of his bodily health leaving half of the deep-coloured port in the bottle, paid his bill without a murmur, and sallied forth to the telegraph office, whence the following message from "Steven Lawrence to Dora Fane" was, five minutes later, transmitted:

"Just arrived in Southampton Docks, per 'Oneida.'

Shall be with you before nine o'clock. I am grateful for your goodness in writing to me."

After this, an hour or more yet remaining before the train left, he started off for a walk through the streets of Southampton, looking, with the zest of a South Sea Islander, into the shop windows—not quite unmindful of any pretty faces that chanced to stand behind the counter—and gradually fell to speculating whether it might be wise in him to attempt to modify his personal appearance somewhat before presenting himself to his love. She would not, for certain, be a woman to measure a man by his coat and necktie; but were not all women swayed more than men by the frivolities of fashion? Was it not a risk that she should see him for the first time in his transatlantic clothes, with the rough, backwoodsman air of the other world?

Clothes, of course, there was no time to think of. Miss Fane must accept him, perforce, in the rough shooting-suit that he had got before leaving Vera Cruz. Gloves and a tall hat he might buy in five minutes, and he bought them. Horribly these lavender-coloured "eights" teased him; he had not had a pair of gloves on his hands for the last ten years! Then, a barber's shop immediately confronting the haberdasher's, it occurred to him that shaving off his beard might reduce him, perhaps, to the requisite mean of civilization quicker than any other process, and, crossing the street, he walked in and requested to be shaved at once.

"Shaved plain, sir?" said the polite little barber, glancing up, not without artistic compunction, at

Steven's magnificent growth of beard. "Plain style, sir, or the military—moustache left?"

"Not military, for certain," said Steven, going into the inner shop, and never giving a look at himself in the glass as he sat down. "I'm a stranger in England, and I want to be shaved English fashion—as countrymen, plain farmers or the like, wear their beards."

"Oh, very good!" politeness unaltered, but with an octave, at least, of flattery taken out of the barber's voice by the word "farmer." "I quite understand you, sir." And in a quarter of an hour a pair of moderate-sized whiskers was all the hair remaining on Steven's face.

I said, when I spoke of him bearded, that nature would scarcely commit the anomaly of allying a weak mouth with the bold blue eyes and resolute forehead of Steven Lawrence. His mouth is the reverse of weak. The lips are full and squarely cut, the chin masculine, and still—still the story that is graven there is one of physical, far more than of moral strength, after all. An acute student of human expression might accredit the possessor of that mouth with being passionate in love, warm in friendship, generous, fond of life and of his own share in life always: but heroic, never! And he would be right, viewing heroism from the highest, or transcendental point of view. Steven was just a man to be strong one day and weak the next—to commit one right action and three faulty ones immediately afterwards: in a word, was a man not to rule his own life, but be ruled by it, as you will see.

He got up and looked long—a most unwonted thing for him to do—in the glass. How young he was

still! the thought struck him instantly. How like the boy Steven Lawrence, with whom he had had so little to do in later years. The sight of his own beardless face seemed to bring him back far more vividly to England than the fact of treading upon English ground had done. The old house at Ashcot, the kitchen fire-side, the little bedroom where his mother died, and where her black-framed picture hung (the room to which he had stolen, the picture he had kissed on the April night when he first ran away to sea)—with passionate reality all the happiness, all the misery of his boyish life, was unlocked before him by this strangely familiar face—his own, at which he stood and looked!

"It does make a difference, doesn't it?" said the polite barber, rubbing his hands. "If you will permit, sir, I should advise the hair being cut—machine, latest improvement—considerably shorter. Both the military and the country gentlemen wear the 'air short to the 'ead, if I may be allowed the expression."

Steven submitted passively to being machine-shorn, and brushed and perfumed to the barber's taste; then, with his thoughts still very far away, walked along the High Street, looking neither at shop-windows nor pretty faces now, in the direction of the railway.

Just outside the door of the station a girl of about thirteen stood, selling violets; a girl with a white small face, a shrunken figure, and eyes from whose blue the childhood seemed already to have faded. The moment Steven approached, she singled him out, with the quick instinct of her age, as a man to be cajoled into buying, and, fawning to his side, put up a meagre hand, holding its merchandise, to tempt him.

"Vi'lets, sweet vi'lets, gentlemen! take a bunch to town for your lady, kind gentlemen. I gathered 'em fresh myself this evening. The London vi'lets don't smell like these, gentlemen."

"Don't they, indeed?" said Steven, looking down at her face, and with his deep manly voice becoming marvellously sweet and gentle at the sight of its childish pallor. "Then I suppose I must have yours, for my lady, as you say."

He took two bunches from the poor little thin hand, and gave the child half-a-crown.

"I've no change, kind gentleman," she whined, looking up at him, and making a pretence of holding the half-crown out for him to take it back.

"No? then you must keep it all for yourself, pretty one," said Steven, cheerily, and putting back her attenuated hand with his own stalwart brown one. "Good-bye."

The child stared in mute wonder after his big figure, until it was lost among the crowd within the doorway. Then she looked at her half-crown; rubbed it bright on her skirt; held it up to the fading evening light; tested it against her lips; finally hid it away in the breast of her ragged frock.

"Easy to see where he comes from," she thought. "Easy to see he's been where they dig the gold. What a fine tall man to have such a kind voice; and he touched *me*— he said good-bye to *me*,"—the colour rising over the pinched, small face. "Oh, ain't he just a flat!"

This was the first definite feminine opinion formed upon Steven Lawrence on his return to England.

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## CHAPTER III.

## The Life of the Wilderness.

FOR generations back Steven's forefathers—farmers by profession, but not averse, whenever money could be made by it, to horse-dealing, or, indeed (so said tradition), to a little irregular trade in French wines and brandies—had lived upon their own small freehold of land in the sea-board parish of Broad Clithero, Kent. No deed of entail secured to the eldest born son of the Lawrences the rights of primogeniture, but primogeniture, unenforced by law, was as sacred in their family, as in the family of any earl of England, as much a part of their social belief as were the doctrines of Wesley of their religion.

When Steven's grandfather died he left two sons: Joshua, the eldest, already looked upon as a confirmed bachelor of forty-five, and Steven, a married man and the father of a boy of eleven—the Steven of this story. "If Joshua marries," the old man said on his death-bed, looking wistfully at the down-cast face of his eldest son—"if Joshua marries, Steven will have to make a home for his wife and Steenie elsewhere, but till then, I'd like them to bide at Ashcot. I've a feeling little Steenie'll be master here some day, and I'd like him to grow up on the farm in his youth. A man doesn't work the land with the same heart in his middle age if he's been a stranger to it when he was a boy."

And Joshua Lawrence had not only promised that, whether he married or no, Ashcot should be the home of Steven and his family, but had held faithfully to

the letter of his word. A year after the old man's death Steven Lawrence was killed by a fall in the hunting field, and Joshua at once took upon himself, as a matter of course, the maintenance of the widow and her boy.

He was a man of few words, sober—unlike the majority of the Lawrences in this!—plain, reserved; a man who courted the society of men little, of women not at all; and young Steven was soon looked upon just as surely as the heir of Ashcot as though Joshua had been his father, not his uncle. With his sister-in-law to keep his house, this boy for his heir, what chance was there that Joshua Lawrence, a woman-hater at thirty, should seek to marry a wife at forty-five? No direct word on the part of Joshua himself had ever confirmed the certainty of Steven's heirship, but Joshua was a man chary of speech on all matters, and the way in which he treated his nephew was more than sufficient proof, so thought the world, and Steven's mother, and Steven himself, to show the place the boy held within his heart. Up to the age of fourteen he was sent, profiting as little as possible by the instruction he received, to a tolerable school in Canterbury. He then at his uncle's side learnt—or rather was perfected in: he had learnt from his infancy—the practical management of the land he already looked upon as his own. He was always well dressed yeoman-fashion; rode to hounds better mounted than half the gentlemen's sons in the county; and held his handsome face high when he saluted the parson or squire, or even old Lord Haverstock himself in the lanes.

"Every inch a Lawrence," the gossips of the parish



used to say as they looked after him, "Joshua was a poor creature—had his mother's blood in him—a man to grudge himself his meat, and die in his bed at last. The boy was of the true Lawrence sort. A chip of the old block, every bit of him." Which, in that neighbourhood, meant a man to live hard and die with a broken neck in a ditch or a broken head in a smuggling fray before fifty. These, tradition had handed down as the orthodox proclivities of the Lawrences; the poor creatures, or men taking after their mothers, being those stray members of the family who kept the farm together and paid for the funeral meats of the Lawrences *pur sang*. Whatever his fate in other respects, Steven learnt when he was within a few weeks of seventeen the exact position in which he stood as regarded Ashcot; learnt it suddenly, his uncle being out in the fields, from the lips of a person in purple satin who arrived, a little boy in her hand, and informed Mrs. Steven Lawrence and her son that she was "Mr. Joshua's lady."

"Not—not his wife?" faltered the widow, throwing a trembling hand round her son's neck, as the whole vista of his ruined life passed before her. "That—that child can never be the heir before Steenie!"

And it was in the mingled torrent of virtue and not unnatural venom that this remark called forth from the invader, that Joshua Lawrence came back from his work across the threshold of his own house. He turned horribly white at seeing these four people in one small room; the pale, indignant-eyed widow, Steven flushed and silent by his mother's side; his own sickly child; the flaunting, gaily-dressed woman, whose dozen of boxes stood already inside the porch. Joshua

Lawrence turned white; but he took at once the only side a man of sense ever takes in family discussion—his wife's.

"You might have written, Charlotte, but as you are here you are welcome. Steenie, shake hands with the child. 'Twill make no difference to you, lad. You and your mother will always find a home at Ashcot as long as I live. You are about in time for dinner, Charlotte."

No difference! How glibly such euphemisms glide from the lips of men seeking to slur over the consequences of their own weakness or their own injustice! The first points, of course, discussed in the neighbourhood as to Joshua Lawrence's marriage were the outside facts of the mystery. Who was this woman? Where had he met her? Why had he married her? Why had he not lived with her? Then, when it was ascertained that there was no mystery at all—that the woman was the widow of a London draper's assistant, that Joshua Lawrence had married her without love or any other intelligible reason (the history of most marriages), had lived apart from her about on the same grounds as he had married her, and had seen her once a fortnight when he went up to Leadenhall Market during the last dozen years or so—the interest turned to the dispossessed heir, young Steven: Steven, to whom the advent of a legitimate wife and son at Ashcot was to make "no difference." And from old Lord Haverstock down to the lowest ploughman on the farm there was not a heart that did not bleed for the lad under the new position in which he found himself.

He took his fate with a sullen, hard sort of re-

signation which, at his age, did not augur particularly well for the future. On the morning after "Charlotte's" arrival, went up to his uncle's side in the fields and asked him what kind of wages his services on the farm were about worth? "I'm a servant now, and I don't want to pretend to be a master. Young Josh may have my gun, and my pony, and the rest of it. Play is over for me. Working as I can work, shall I still, without wronging your family, be able to keep my mother at Ashcot?"

Joshua Lawrence was cut to the quick with contrition. He had married—because he had married! and had done Steven infinite injustice in allowing him through all these years to be looked upon as his heir. But weakness had been his worst sin. In his heart he was a just and not an ungenerous man, and the thought of Steenie working as a servant on the old farm brought tears, for the first time since he was a child, into the yeoman's eyes. Steven was no more a servant than little Josh. There was no reason why the farm shouldn't one day be shared between them alike. Let the boys live together as brothers, and Charlotte and Jane help each other in house-keeping. With more of the same platitudes which men are wont to talk when they would throw oil on the troubled waters of family jealousy and family discord.

Power went, as it always does, into the hands of its legitimate claimants. In six months Steven slouched to his daily work, dressed like a labourer, and young Josh was riding his pony about the country. In six months the keys, one by one, had passed over to Charlotte, and the greater part of the widow's time was spent in her bedroom in tears and wishes, with

which she cheered young Steven of an evening, that she was lying in Clithero churchyard at her husband's side. She was a woman of feeble imagination, and in time probably would have submitted to the prospect of an impoverished future for her boy and herself, if a little bit of present rule had only been left to her in the household. What she could not get over was the loss of the keys. As one by one these insignia of office were wrested from her she would at first faintly expostulate with her brother-in-law, who always promised and never dared to speak to Charlotte about it; then she gave up with only the meek irony that she "hoped Mrs. Joshua would mend the linen and make the preserves last as well as she had done." Finally, when the last shred of power was gone from her, took, as I have said, to her bedroom, and to infusing into young Steven's cup a yet bitterer draught than that which his own galled heart already gave him to drink.

This state of things lasted over a twelvemonth; then poor Mrs. Steven's wish was accomplished, and a neat funeral procession, for Joshua was a just man in everything, conveyed her from the farm to her husband's side in Clithero churchyard. Steven read immense resignation on every face in the house—indecently unconcealed on Mrs. Lawrence's and Josh's! veiled, but none less real, on his uncle's—to the cross which, in the family prayers, they acknowledged to have been laid upon them. And before his mother had been twenty-four hours buried, had begun to form his own plans of escape from the home to which neither duty nor affection bound him now.

The Californian gold fever was at that time still at its height. Spelling over his uncle's *Sunday Times*

a fortnight old, by the fire in the long evenings, the boy read of fortunes made, fortunes that would buy up Ashcot, ay, and the squire's land too, in a few weeks, and with no help, no interest, save a man's own stout right arm. What was there to hinder him, if he could reach this El Dorado, from digging nuggets as big as other men's? Was he to spend his life as a labourer on his cousin's farm, when beyond the sea wealth, power, pleasure, were to be wrested from the earth with scarce an effort more than it had cost them to grub up the quickset hedge down in the five-acres?

After a good many sleepless nights, and when, by dint of studying his old geography books, he had mastered, approximately, where California lay, Steven ventured to sound his uncle on the subject. So much gold had been dug by one man; so much by two brothers; so much by a gang of five. As Josh would have the farm, and—hanging his head—as there was no one much to care about his absence now, wouldn't it be as well to see if his strong shoulders might bring about better fortune in another country than it was ever possible for them to yield him here at home?

Joshua Lawrence's answer was a brief one. His temper had soured wonderfully under his wife's rule; and his never dying sense of the injury he had done Steven, made him peevishly averse at all times to discussing the lad's future prospects. Emigration and gold digging were the last resource of blackguards. He did not know the Lawrences had sunk to that yet. If Steven couldn't brook the thought of young Josh sharing the land with him he must go into trade. Old Wandsworth, the chandler, at Canterbury, wanted an apprentice, and he would not mind paying a good

premium, if Steven had a mind for the business. As to California, or any other foreign part, he forbade such a word ever being mentioned in his presence again.

It was one Sunday morning on their way to the meeting-house that this conversation took place. On the evening of the next day, a fresh April evening—the smell of the child's violets recalls it to him now!—Steven Lawrence stole away from Ashcot, as he believed, for ever. In the day, while his uncle believed him cheerfully at work among the men, his heart had taken leave of every wood, every field about the farm. As evening came on he had managed on some excuse or another to have a word with each of the labourers as he was leaving work. When his cousin went to bed had followed the child wistfully from the parlour and given him a many-clasped knife that Josh had long coveted with hot envy to possess. Bitter as was his hatred for his life, resolute as was his determination of severing himself from it, Steven had but a boy's heart still, and when the first sharp step was taken—when he had got clear of the farm and stood looking from the high-road down upon the old house and garden bathed in soft spring moonlight—the tears rained hot and fast down the cheek of this bold adventurer who was to conquer wealth and fortune with his own strong arm beyond the seas.

He reached San Francisco with the very worn clothes he stood in, and the sum of eight shillings in his pocket: his father's watch and a few poor trinkets of his mother's having, with his own work, just sufficed to pay his passage out. Eight shillings, his broad shoulders, handsome face, and the heart of a child. What a stock in trade for a lad set adrift, at eighteen,

in the gold diggings! the last resource, as Joshua Lawrence, narrowly but not unjustly, had remarked, of all the greatest blackguards in the world.

Need I describe the kind of El Dorado that Steven had in reality fallen upon? How he starved and feasted alternately. How he worked, and was robbed, openly, then under the guise of dice or cards: one time at the diggings themselves, the next after he had brought back his gold to Francisco, or Sacramento. The boyishness, I need scarcely tell you, was soon knocked out of him: the manhood, I know not by what miracle, never. Associating with the veriest scum of civilization, from the broken down Parisian or New York gambler to the most ruffianly of all roughs, the cosmopolitan "shoulder-striker" of Californian cities, something in the robust yeoman blood of Steven Lawrence kept him an Englishman, I nearly wrote an English gentleman, still. With cowardice and dishonesty part of the very air he breathed; familiarised with such scenes as only gross ignorance, vice, and newly-gotten gold allied can generate; Steven, however else he erred, was loyal in courage and in honour to his better nature still. Perhaps a certain constitutional slowness, both of mind and body, went far to save him. A quick-brained, lissom-fingered, town-bred man falls easier, perforce, into the habits of city black-guardism, than a man whose country-nurtured perceptions receive temptation slowly, and whose robust hands are physically better adapted for digging gold in bulk out of the earth, than for filching it, stamped, out of the pockets of others. He made no fortune, as many worse men did; was not singularly unlucky, yet never belonged to a gang that came upon any unwonted

vein of metal; and the enormous price of provisions, joined to robbery of every kind, usually left him in a condition of infinitely less comfort than the poorest labourer on his uncle's farm at Ashcot.

So went by four years. Then Steven fell in with old Klaus, and, in a few weeks, had exchanged the fever of gold-seeking and tainted atmosphere of Sacramento gambling-rooms for the air of the broad prairies, the wholesome austere life of a hunter in the wilderness. Their first meeting happened thus: Klaus like many another old backwoodsman at that time, had been tempted down into California, more, in his case, from curiosity than from any real thirst to join the gold seekers, and, one night, as he was going back to his shanty, on the outskirts of Sacramento city, found a man senseless, and bleeding fast to death in his path. The man was Steven. Coming out from one of the gambling-houses, of which latterly he had become a too-constant frequenter, a street fight had arisen, the sorry history of which would ill befit these pages, and Steven, a champion of weakness, however lost, however degraded, had thrown himself, without stopping to reason, upon the losing side. The result was a wound from a bowie-knife in his side, a stunned head, the loss of whatever money he had about him, and Klaus's friendship! A man does not go to the help of forlorn womanhood, even amidst the off-scouring of Californian streets, without some reward.

Klaus, helped by a stray Samaritan or two, bore on his helpless burthen a couple of hundred yards to his shed; bound up his wounds; laid him on his own scanty portion of straw; gave him cold water to drink throughout the night; and, early next morning,



called in a surgeon to look at him. It was a bad case, said the man of science, and if, as was probable, the lad was given to drink, 'twould end fatally; and returned no more. But Klaus, like most old hunters, not unversed in leechcraft, thought differently. The lad did not look to him like one given to drink, and for certain, thought the old German, as he looked at Steven's comely limbs and handsome face, was a lad worth holding, if he could be held, to life.

And so, in unconscious helplessness on one side, in purest compassion on the other, began their intimacy. When Steven, after a fierce life and death struggle, got back something of his strength, Klaus carried him away at once down the river, south.

"You have missed your vocation, friend," he said quietly, as they stood together on the steamer's deck, watching the last buildings of the town fade into distance. "You'll be more at home in my life, among the bears and panthers, than in defending one set of *spitzbuben* against another in the streets of Sacramento. As to fortune, you'll make that nowhere! Men of your measure don't."

And Klaus on both points was right. Steven was not a man destined to make his fortune. The warfare of the woods—the science of the deer stalker or the still hunter—was far more suited to his capacity than were any of the contests by which men gain pre-eminence over their fellows in the crowded arenas of civilization. Nature had endowed him with no common powers of endurance, with a heart insensible to danger, with love that was a passion for all free, out-of-door life, and with sufficiently quick perceptions to learn the higher intricacies of the science of woodcraft. With

loneliness to sharpen these perceptions to the uttermost, with Klaus for his master, and for his school the prairies and forest of Texas—with occasional migrations for wild fowl to the canebreaks of Louisiana, or the gulfs of Northern Mexico—the Kentish lad made himself, as years went on, a name mighty even in regions where all men, by birth and by education alike, are hunters. He was no amateur, no gentleman sportsman, killing big game by way of fresh excitement in American forests. Not a dollar of his Californian gold remained: not a shilling was ever remitted to him from the old home in England: Steven Lawrence earned his bread by his gun, as Klaus did, and in every respect lived the life of an ordinary professional hunter. To a gentleman (unless you call old Klaus one) he never spoke; a lady he never saw, except when they went into cities to sell their game, and beautiful American girls, with rose and white skins, and gorgeous Parisian dresses, floated, as impossible visions only, before the young fellow's sight! But for spelling aloud a chapter out of his pocket Bible every Sunday morning—when they had kept count of the days—he would probably have lost the art of reading altogether; for books were rare objects in the wilderness, and Steven, never fond of study, submitted with perfect resignation to their absence.

About twice in three years he despatched a letter home; a letter written in text hand and phonetic spelling, and excessively brief, not because any ill-feeling rankled in his heart still, but because writing was really a herculean labour, both of head and hand, to him. "Not the writing, or the spelling, Klaus," he would say, "though they are the deuce; but the matter. What heads fellows

must have who can fill their three and four pages, as some do, every Christmas, and even oftener."

In return three letters, sent under cover always to a friend of Klaus's in New Orleans, reached him from his family during the first nine-and-a-half years of his exile; each of which letters announced a death. The first was from Joshua Lawrence, the sole occasion on which he ever wrote to his nephew; a short, dry letter, saying it had pleased heaven that his Charlotte should be taken from him, and that whenever Steven chose to give up his evil courses a place at the old fireside was ready for him. Young Josh was well, but not as steady at his work as could be wished. Josh's heart was not in the land, and he never seemed happy unless he was running up to London now. If Steven returned, it would be for Josh's advantage that they should undertake the management and the profits of the farm together between them before his death, an event which he did not believe was very far distant.

The next was from Josh himself, written in a feeble schoolboy hand, on inch-deep mourning paper, to inform his dear cousin that "the Lord had seen fit to deprive him of the *best of parents*, that his father having left no will the estate was now his *to an acre*, and that he was very glad to think his dear cousin was getting on so comfortably in America. Would it be a *great trouble* to send him over some bear skins? *et cetera*. He was going to fit up the south bedroom (once Mrs. Steven's) as a *sangtom*, and would like bear skins to lay down before the fireplace as he had seen at young Lord Haverstock's."

What a *sangtom* was, Steven no more thought of asking himself than he thought of sending the

skins that were to match Lord Haverstock's. His uncle was dead; his last friend gone; the last link that in any way bound him to the old life, broken. He walked about with his rifle, wearing a solemn face than usual for a few days; put some crape round his sombrero as soon as he got near enough to a town to buy it; wrote a few lines to Josh—neither bitter nor contemptuous ones: men to whom orthography is an abstruse science always choose affection as the easiest mode of expressing themselves—then went on silently with his accustomed employments as usual.

The wilderness was, in very fact, his home now, he felt. Up to the present time some unacknowledged hope had ever knitted his heart to England still. In mid-day forest quiet, or watching alone beside the fire at night, he had been haunted by visions of living on the old farm, of standing by a grave in the old churchyard before he died. All this was over. Every acre was Josh's. This Isaac, six years younger than himself, whose heart was "not in the land," and who was fitting up the old farm-house after the pattern of Lord Haverstock's, had got the farm, for good and all, now. And he was Ishmael. Was it a man's part to fret after one rood of the land that he had lost? Were not these oceans of prairie, this wilderness of forest, this unchecked savage liberty more than compensation for the poor little Kentish freehold of which he had missed the possession?

By the time he had thoroughly brought himself not only to believe in, but to be consoled by this philosophy, came another black-edged letter, directed in a strange, lawyer's hand, to tell him that he was in fact, as years before he had been in imagination, the master

of Ashcot. Young Joshua, still weak from a recent attack of illness, had been upset from his dog-cart as he was driving a tandem home from Canterbury one Sunday night, and killed on the spot. Mr. Steven Lawrence's instructions would be waited respecting the administration of the estate, and Francis Dawes, his late uncle's head man, would be kept on to look after the farm until his return.

This letter was followed, much to Steven's discomfiture, by half a score of others. People who had forgotten the outcast adventurer, or remembered him as the typical prodigal of the Lawrence family, seemed not alone to have got back clearest recollection of him now, but resolved to make his life miserable by continual reading and writing. The solicitor wrote long-winded business letters to him, and received a curt reply that Dawes might carry on the business of the farm at present; he, Steven, had no intention of leaving America, and very probably would decide on selling the estate. Then came strange hieroglyphics from Dawes himself; then a sermon from the Wesleyan minister, setting forth before his absent parishioner the duties that he would discharge to himself and to society by living like a Christian man on his own land (to which Steven, out of patience with all this letter writing, answered, in careful round text, that "he hoped he knew how to live like a Christian man *anywhere*." ) Then Dora Fane wrote to him, for old friendship's sake, and enclosing the picture of a beautiful face, and graceful girlish throat, and five weeks after he got her letter, Steven, as you know, was taking his ticket for London at the Southampton railway station.

You have heard his raptures over her photograph

on the Mexican forest side. Now for the living picture, as it was to appear before him in the velvet-hung wax-lit drawing-room of 122, Hertford Street, May Fair!

## CHAPTER IV.

### Too Late!

"HALF-PAST EIGHT, Katharine, and he says in his message—what a message! who on earth before was ever obliged and grateful by telegraph—that he will be 'with me' before nine. In another ten minutes, I suppose, this wild man of the woods will be here. Now mind you don't go away—whatever you do, mind you don't go away for an instant. I wouldn't be left alone with Steven Lawrence—oh, not for the world!"

And as she said this, Dora Fane gave, or pretended to give, a shudder at the horrible image which her own words had called forth before her imagination.

She was a pretty, excessively little woman, somewhat under thirty in reality, twenty-two at the first glance, and viewed from her own focus. Perhaps the word little hardly conveys a sense of her proportions. She was not remarkably short, but small-made almost to the verge of dwarfishness, tiny head, atoms of feet and hands, atoms of features, ears like little pink shells, the waist of a child of eleven. Nothing large about her but a pair of great bead-black eyes and her voice, which was at once voluminous and penetrating, a voice that could make itself heard at any time from one end to the other of a ball-room, or straight across from box to box, in a crowded theatre. Her hair, of a copper-like shade, not wholly true to nature, was cropped short, and dressed in little soft baby-curls round her

head; her complexion, in the right focus, was wonderfully carnation and white; jet black brows the thickness of a line, and a faint bluish darkness round her large eyes, contrasted artistically with the fair colouring of the rest of the head. Like most very little women, Dora loved large ornaments. A pair of earrings constructed, according to the last beautiful Paris fashion, to look like ladders, hung from her ears to her shoulders; a buckle that would have been large on a larger woman, but on her was a breast-plate, glittered at her mite of a waist; and her fingers were covered with rings that, being designed for normally-sized hands, gave Dora's the look of a child's acting "grown-up people" at its mother's dressing-table.

"Just the sort of beauty to dazzle this poor savage man," she thought, as she stood, tiptoe, before the fire, and glanced, with one little hand resting on the crimson velvet of the mantel-piece, at herself in the glass. "He may have seen plenty of girls like Katharine—the American women have that sort of *beauté du diable*, they say. No man could ever see a woman like *me* out of London or Paris!" Then aloud, "You hear me, Katharine? You'll be sure not to leave Steven Lawrence and me for one moment alone together."

"Well, yes, I hear, Dot," answered Katharine Fane, who, in a Cinderella morning dress, was sitting on a low stool by the fireside, and as she spoke a pair of serene fawn-coloured eyes were raised slowly to Dora's. "I hear, but I don't understand. Of course it was quite right that I should stay at home to chaperon you and Stev—I beg his pardon, and Mister Lawrence—but as to leaving you alone. . . Dot with every confidence in your ability, let me give you one piece of

advice. Don't, as I'm afraid it's your nature to do, Dot dear, over-act with Steven Lawrence. Because a man has spent ten years or so in the woods of America, it does not necessarily follow that he should be a perfect fool, you know. After the kind of letters that have passed between Steven Lawrence and you, it seems to me a great deal more honest and natural, and everything else, that you *should* be left alone. I look upon you already——"

"In the same light that you look upon yourself and Lord Petres?" cried Dot, as the girl hesitated. "Is that what you would say?"

The great shining eyes sank down and gazed intently into the fire again. "I would be perfectly honest with the poor fellow, Dot, if I were in your place. Acting and counter-acting, holding out encouragement one day, feigning reserve the next, may be very well in the kind of world and with the men you and I've had to do with. But with this man—I don't know why—something tells me that 'twould be best to be sincere. Do you know, Dot," abruptly, "I like this poor Steven, his telegram, and his letters and all, wonderfully?"

"His letters!" cried Dot, with her ringing laugh. "What, the spelling or the composition, or what?"

"I like the heart of them," said Katharine Fane. "All the men I have known could spell and compose too—if you call it composition—but none of their letters ever touched me like the one this poor fellow wrote to you from Mexico. I think the way in which he thanked you for your photograph was charming, Dot—oh yes, spelling and grammar and all! To think of a man, after ten years of absence, being touched, as



he was, by seeing the picture of the woman he had loved when he was a boy!"

Dora Fane took her hand from the mantelpiece and raised a scrap of Mechlin lace that it held to her lips. "Katharine," she said, when a minute or two had passed by silently, "do you think, really, there's any truth in what some people say about our being alike? Now, on your honour—I've a particular reason for asking you this to-night."

"Our being alike!" cried Katharine with a start. "Heavens, Dot, how far away I was just then! Well, you know some people do see a likeness. Who was it—Lord Petres?—no, Mr. Clarendon Whyte—said the other day there was a strong family likeness in the turn of the upper lip. What in the world made you think of that now?"

"Oh, nothing particular! just a fancy of mine. We're not alike in reality, and when you see us together of course, because you're twice my size, and—and paler and stouter," added Dot, looking consciously at the reflection of her own small face in the glass. "But, as far as feature goes—now, don't you think it quite possible that a photograph of you might be taken for me by any one who didn't know us well?"

"By any one who didn't know us, certainly. A photograph of mine, or of yours, might be taken for Bella, or the Phantom! by any one who didn't know us. What *are* you asking all this for, Dot? Are you afraid Steven Lawrence will think me more like your portrait than you are yourself, and insist upon being in love with the wrong Dulcinea? Set your mind at rest, Dot. A man like Lawrence would not be likely—"

"To set his affections so high!" interrupted Dot. "No I suppose not,—thanks for the compliment though, Katharine dear! But I am not at all afraid," perching herself on a footstool so as to command a fuller view of her own dainty image. "I think you a classic beauty, you know, Katharine. Hyacinth eyes, and Naiad hair—no, Naiad eyes and Hyacinth hair (what is that thing Clarendon Whyte repeats of the Poet—Shelley, is it? who wrote about baboons murdering people and putting them up the chimney?). But still, in my own humble way, I would rather be Dora than Katharine Fane any day. Now look at me, Katharine, look at me, and say if I'm not looking my best to night? Isn't the pearl-grey silk, and the knot of crimson velvet in my hair, perfection? Look at me and say, quite frankly, if there is anything that *could* add to my appearance at this moment?" And she turned herself slowly round, as the pivoted figures in the shop windows turn, for her cousin's approval; then, with her tiny hands in a posture, her great eyes wide open, and her red lips in a pretty attitude of repose, stood waiting for a reply.

Katharine looked at her attentively: the fluffy short hair, the scarlet cheeks, the enormous ornaments, the tiny hands, the yard-and-a-half skirt, more than half of which lay outspread behind Dora Fane upon the heath-rug.

"Dot," she said at last, "you're a beautiful little woman." Dot's eyes brightened. From man or woman, from duke or dress-maker, any incense to her beauty could make this doll's heart beat with rapture. "I always have thought, always shall think you the prettiest little creature in every ball or theatre or assembly of

any kind where I see you. But to-night—now don't take it amiss, Dot—to-night I should like you better if you looked a little less, if—if you had just a shade less of colour in your cheeks! It makes you look hectic, Dot. It makes you look old—less young, dear, than you do when you are pale. Now you won't be cross with me for saying this?"

"Less colour! why I have been standing before the fire," cried Dot with dignity. "I get like this always at night, Katharine, as you know, I'm consumptive—if you could feel how my poor cheeks are burning now! It is not everyone that admires a complexion of *stone*, you must remember, Kate."

"No, Dot. I only said what I thought, I only meant——"

"Oh well! of course I can go into a cooler room," interrupted Dot, walking away towards the door. "Of course I can bathe my poor flushed cheeks, and try to bring them up to the standard of classic pallor before Mr. Lawrence comes. Only one thing, please Katharine—the moment you hear a double knock, come as quick as you can up to my room. I don't want you to be the first—I mean, I could never have courage to come down by myself and find the man waiting here alone for me."

The tiny figure swept out of the room, and Katharine Fane went back to her old attitude, her old contemplation of things "far away," in the glowing heart of the fire. In a close-fitting brown dress, with plain bands of white linen at her throat and wrists, not a brooch nor an ornament of any kind, her hair pushed back carelessly from her forehead, the celebrated London beauty—the syren who had led so many men to

their ruin—looked fairer than she had ever looked at court ball, in silk and roses, and with a throng of slaves at her feet: for an unwonted light was in Katharine's eyes; an unwonted feeling made the beautiful lips serious as well as sweet.

For the first time in her life she was about to be brought, not at second hand, as in operas and novels, but into direct contact with the romance all her monitors and all her experience had taught her to laugh at, yet which her inmost heart so passionately believed in still. This man, this peasant they were waiting for, was "in love" with Dora. Her eyes softened, her pulses thrilled at the thought. Love! Poor little Dora with the wax-doll face, wax-doll heart, was standing (prettily painted, and busy at this moment with rice powder) on the threshold of the great mystery, and she—was engaged to Lord Petres! and had wide vistas of dress, diamonds, dinners, carriages, and opera boxes, before her. There was the difference.

A double knock came at the house door; and Katharine Fane, ordinarily the most collected woman living, rose hurriedly to her feet, and, forgetting Dot's commands and Dot's existence, stood and waited with a beating heart beside the fire. There was a light quick foot-fall upon the stairs; then the door opened and closed; and Steven, pale with excitement—handsomer, nobler she thought, even in this second, than any man whom she had ever known—stood before her.

She moved towards him, with an outstretched hand, with parted lips, and he caught her abruptly in his arms and kissed her.

"I—Mr. Lawrence!" she exclaimed, freeing herself,

too late, from his clasp. "I—I—you have mistaken. I am Katharine Fane."

Too late! The epitome of the whole story I have to tell is written in those two words.

## CHAPTER V.

### The Right Face.

STEVEN loosened his hold mechanically, but his heart refused, as yet, to take cognisance of its mistake; a mistake, in the common drawing-room comedy called love, to vary, pleasantly than otherwise, the trite unravelling of the time-worn plot, but which for the yeoman was just the ruin, the overthrow of his whole life.

"Katharine!" he repeated, as if he had not understood her, and gazing steadily at the perfect face that so far surpassed his dreams, "how good you have been to me! What have I done that you should treat me with such goodness?"

"Mr. Lawrence," said Katharine Fane, gently, for it was not in her to be aught but gentle, yet with as much stately coldness as she could command, "I must repeat that you are mistaking me for my cousin Dora. She will be down directly—we received your telegram an hour ago, and expected you already. Dora is looking very well. You will scarce see a change in her, I should think. Come near the fire, will you not, please? After your beautiful Mexico how cold these English east winds must seem to you!" And she walked back, calm and self-possessed to the fireside; thence invited Steven with a gesture of her hand to approach her.

He came up, spoke never a word, but stood and looked at her still; looked at her until, with all the experience gained during the two last London seasons, Katharine Fane's eyes sank, and her heart began to beat thick and fast. Placed with a man of the world in this ridiculously awkward position, she had freed herself from it by a single word, a word lightly spoken but impossible to misconstrue; with any other man of Steven Lawrence's condition she would, his lips having desecrated hers, his eyes bringing hot blushes into her cheek, have rung the bell and ordered his condign expulsion, then and for ever, from the house. But with this poor savage, his beautiful face, his childish passionate admiration of her, his utter disregard of her explanations appealing to her as a child's, a dog's mute eloquence might have done, how was it possible for her to feel otherwise than generous and forgiving! She was in a position the like of which had never tried her worldly knowledge or her pride till now; she stood face to face before a human creature she had had scant dealing with during her twenty-one years of life—a man, simple, honest, terribly in earnest, and for whom her instinct told her a bitter awakening was at hand—and so, instead of attempting to put him in his place, instead of attempting anything, she simply lifted up her head to him and smiled. (To his last hour Steven could never forget how she smiled!) "I was a very little girl when you went away, Mr. Lawrence, but it seems to me now that I remember you. I remember you gave me a bunch of primroses the last evening Dora and I ever saw you. How pleasant it is to think of old days like those! I am very glad that you have come back to England for good!"

Her voice, her kindness, a certain dawning pity in her eyes, woke Steven to the truth.

"I have been a fool," said he bluntly, "and now I have just to ask your forgiveness and go. Miss Fane, I have been misled, I see, by my stupidity, or through the cruellest of mistakes. I returned—shall I shame to own it?—for the sake of Dora Fane, and I find—"

"You will find," cried Katharine, earnestly, "you will find Dora Fane the dearest, the most charming little creature in the world! I speak warmly of my cousin, Mr. Lawrence, and you will see that I do not over-estimate her. We are somewhat like each other, I think"—here she shrank again from the expression of his eyes—"only Dora is fairer and smaller—I always say younger-looking; however, in a moment you will see her. How time passes! Can it really be ten years since you and Dora last met?"

Steven Lawrence took a locket from his pocket, unfastened its clasp, and held it out open to Katharine. "This picture that Dora Fane sent me is of you," he said, "and is as like you as a flat surface without colour and without life can be like a woman. If I lived for a hundred years and might speak to you daily, Miss Fane, I should never make you know what the possession of this little photograph has been to me during the last six weeks."

She took the locket from his hand, and in a second the blood flushed crimson in Katharine's face; the photograph was of her. The instinct of the poor savage was true; he had returned for her, and no other, and had found her—thus!

"This is a most absurd mistake, Mr. Lawrence. Dora is so desperately careless she never can do or

say anything without making a mistake of some kind. Luckily, this one can be easily rectified," with a little laugh. "Leave your locket with me, Mr. Lawrence, and come for it to-morrow morning. The right face shall be in it then, I will promise you."

"The right face is in it now," said poor Steven. "Thank you," as she passively let him take it from her hands. "Whatever happens, I suppose I have your leave to wear it, haven't I?"

Before Katharine Fane could give the decided negative this question deserved, the door opened, and Dot, luminous in the pearl-grey silk, and holding a taper light so that it shone with artistic concentration on the knot of crimson velvet in her hair, appeared there.

"Here is Dora!" cried Katharine, leaving her impending refusal for ever unspoken. "Mr. Lawrence, I don't think there needs any introduction between you and my cousin Dora?"

Steven turned, and before he had time to collect his thoughts the little figure was at his side, a little white hand, boneless like a baby's, in his. "I'm so glad to see you!" cried Dot, in her unmodulated voice. "We expected you an hour ago, and were afraid—weren't we, Katharine?—an accident must have happened to the train, or that the telegraph-wires were wrong, or something. Now, when did you arrive? Oh, to-day, of course—how silly I am! I mean, had you a good passage? We saw the last West Indian mail had yellow fever on board, and were *so* frightened about it, Mr. Lawrence."

"We had no yellow fever, I thank you," said Steven, "and we had a fair wind till two days ago,



when it shifted to the north-east. I believe it was the quickest passage that has been made from Vera Cruz this year."

"And—and you feel yourself at home in England?" said Dot, looking up, not without admiration, at the yeoman's muscular figure and bronzed face. "You are not a bit changed, Mr. Lawrence—not a bit. I see you just as you were that last day at Clithero, yes, even to the bunch of violets at your button-hole."

And Dot laughed—the terrible laugh that was so incongruously disproportioned to that little throat of hers—and stretched out her morsel of a hand towards Steven's violets.

He took them from his button-hole, and flung them into the grate. "They are withered, Miss Fane," said he, shortly. "As I was going into the station at Southampton I saw a child with a basketful of them, and, for old days' sake, I suppose, I took a bunch. They are dead. They have no smell now."

"Ah, you are spoilt by all your grand exotics! Arums and cactus and things—I've seen them in the glass-house at Kew. You won't care for our poor English flowers after all you have been accustomed to in the tropics."

"Arums and cactus are flowers with no smell at all, Miss Fane," remarked Steven, with grim truthfulness; "and among all the plants in the world I've never met with any that give a better smell than English violets. Are you fond of flowers?" and he turned to Katharine again. "I've brought over some hardy Mexican plants with me, that I believe with care I shall bring to thrive on the sunny side of Ashcot. Are you interested in

such things, or do you care for nothing of any sort out of London?"

"If I do I must have a bad time of it," said Katharine Fane; "considering that I spend two months, at most, of the year in London, and the rest at Clithero. Surely you don't think Dora and I have grown into London fine ladies, do you, Mr. Lawrence? Nothing would interest me more than your plants; you must ask us over to Ashcot, please, as soon as we are all down in Kent, to see them."

"Oh, *yes!*" cried Dot, with effusion. "I do so love flowers—" which was true, as the trimming of ball-dresses—"I should take the greatest interest in studying botany with any one who could teach it me pleasantly. Katharine is so clever, she can remember the Latin names, and everything: but that's all beyond me. Now do tell us, in English though, about the beautiful plants you have seen. What can a South American forest be like?" clasping up her small hands. "What would I give to see all the wonders you have, Stev— Mr. Lawrence, I mean!"

"There's a grand Mexican picture of Bierstadt's in the Exhibition this year," said Katharine's soft voice; "a picture of some old city seen at sunrise through a vista of overhanging forest trees. I stood before it yesterday, and wondered whether such forms and colours could possibly be true to nature. You must come with us and tell me, Mr. Lawrence. You will be in town for some time? No? well, nothing is easier now than to run up from Clithero for the day. It's a good season in everything, except east winds; the exhibitions are first-rate; the prince and princess go everywhere, and Patti is singing. If you stayed we should not let you

be idle, I can tell you! General Dering and my sister are so lazy, and Dot and I are for ever in want of an escort."

Katharine's was a voice that nature had filled with lavish music, and when, as now, it was her pleasure to throw into it a certain veiled cadence of half-distant, half-familiar tenderness, no man, whatever his age or condition, had yet been known to resist its charms. The yeoman was no exception to the common rule. Five minutes ago, smarting under his first intolerable disappointment he had fully made up his mind to rush away from Katharine and from England, from all women and from all civilization, for ever. In less than an hour's time he found himself talking in this pleasant amber fire-light—Katharine's smile and voice leading him sweetly along the downward path where they had led so many a wiser man before him—just as unrestrainedly as he had ever talked beside the camp-fire in lonely American forests to old Klaus. Reason, had he listened to reason, would have said to him, "You have been a fool; have made a fool's error; retrieve it. The beautiful siren face, the touching voice, are sold to a man whose fortune and whose birth entitle him to the possession of such things, and are being put forth now for the benefit of the cousin, the little loud-tongued woman who by reason of her waning youth and want of dower, may stoop to marry you. Have done with them: explain openly your folly, if you will, or be silent; but have done with them. Leave them, in all honour, as it is in your power to do still, and go on with your life just as if Katharine Fane's face was not hid away in your breast and in your heart!"

But Steven was pre-eminently a man to be led by

his senses rather than by his brain in everything; and, besides, what did he know of well-bred women or of the well-bred world? How should he tell that these soft looks, and pleasant words, and graceful smiles, were a science in which, at one and twenty, Katharine Fane chanced to be an adept?

Already her eyes sank as she looked at him, already the colour flushed into her delicate waxen cheek at his voice; at one moment she would question him with animated voice, with hearty interest, about his wanderings, at the next speak (as if they were old familiar friends) of Ashcot and of the pleasant country life that lay before them all down in Kent—Dot playing an admirable second throughout—and Steven was in paradise!

His kiss, let me add, upon those perfect lips was fresh in his memory still.

## CHAPTER VI.

### Katharine.

SHE was one of those rarely-gifted women whom all men think beautiful. No class opinions could have weight in judging of Katharine Fane; the fair proportions that Rotten Row and the drive went wild about, artists and sculptors coveted as a model; the face that Descou and Elize vied with each other to adorn in the last new Parisian bonnet, a poet could worship as the throne of pure and simple womanhood still. How shall I describe her? how, by barren category of feature, bring before you the breathing, winning, erring woman, who was to be the happiness and misery of Steven's life? A woman, of whose face the

best photograph was but a caricature; and, in whose exceeding beauty the mere outward perfection of line and colour was the poorest part!

She was tall, without looking her height, and somewhat largely made; a waist short and nobly proportioned; marble-fair arms and bust; hands requiring six-and-three-quarters in gloves, but of unrivalled shape; and a foot that women allowed to be her best point. A little head, well poised above the round white throat; golden-brown hair that waved by nature; golden brown eyes, large, clear, and set in Juno-like serenity beneath the pensive brows; full lips, parted even in repose; a skin delicate as the petals of a Provence rose, and almost as devoid of colour. . . . I could go on with the category, but never bring Katharine Fane herself before you! It was the smile, the voice, the sweet indescribable womanliness of this woman, that made her what she was; the rare unison of charms that neither page nor canvas can seize, and that gives even to the memory of some women such undying fragrance! When Mary lured on her train of victims to their doom must not something more than beauty have shone from her face? Has any picture, has any history given us a clue to the witch-craft of the fatal queen?

People who disliked her—there were very few in the world who did so—called Katharine Fane a consummate actress; every look, every gesture, every word from a woman like that must be artificial, they said. And the generalization was about as shallow as the majority of generalizations. Miss Fane was a consummate actress; yet was each one of her looks, words, and gestures the perfection of nature. Unless you go to the Redskins, perhaps (and they are a good deal hidden by

their ochres), you will never find such outward lack of artifice as in a woman of Katharine Fane's type—never, that is to say, find nature so well selected and so well combined by art. Does a painter go abroad and copy the first landscape, line by line, as he sees it? the cumuli of white clouds and the manufactory chimney that cuts them brutally in twain? the exquisite middle distance of blue moor, and hideous level of dull red-brick field for a foreground? The mastery of art, above all of histrionic art, whether for the footlights or the world, depends on power of adequate selection and combination; and a true artist exercises this, as he does his other faculties, unconsciously. Katharine's modest art, her mission on the planet, was to please. Heaven had bestowed on her the first essential gifts for pleasing; education and the subtle inspirations of her own genius had wrought these endowments to perfection, or the nearest possible imitation of nature. During all her chequered intimacy with Steven—Steven whose unsophisticated instincts were really in most things a crucial test of sincerity, and who, after the first ten minutes, detected a hundred affectations in Dot—he never once was reminded by her of the social difference between them. A yeoman, whose last rough ten years of life had been spent in California or the wilderness, and a high-bred English girl, who for two seasons had had half London at her feet, they ever stood, so thorough, so delicate was her tact, as man and woman upon equal ground; and it would have taken much deeper knowledge of women than poor Steven possessed to decide how far this equality was the result of perfect acting, and how far of genuine sympathy. When the eyes and the cheek and the voice of a beautiful woman all ring

true, it may take more than one man's lifetime to ascertain the fathom-line of her heart. Probably Chastelard and Rizzio and Darnley would have said, each as he died, that the exquisite lips of the royal actress had spoken words of love for him, and for him alone.

At three years of age Katharine Fane first learnt that her golden curls, soft white arms, and beautiful face were good and profitable gifts; easily convertible, when nestling around grown men and women's necks, into fruit and flowers and fond kisses—the riches of that age. At five she was sensible that pretty babbling words to women, and disdainful looks followed by quick relenting to men, brought as many slaves as she chose to possess to her small feet. And from that time to the present, sixteen never-idle years, the knowledge and practice of her craft had been steadily progressing.

She was not less chary of her powers at twenty-one than she had been as a coquette of five. Women less largely endowed reserve their forces; are charming for men only, and among men draw fine distinction—such a smile for an elder brother, such for a married man, such for a prince. Katharine exercised her sway, royally, over the whole world. Women well-nigh forgave her her beauty in consideration of her frank good-nature, her generosity, her large-heartedness. She was one of those exceptional women towards whom her own sex, without using the expression, have somewhat the feeling that men have for a good fellow. Children, from little princesses at court balls down to the ragged urchins on the Kentish sea-board, clung to her skirts and thrust up tiny hands into her warm white clasp the moment they saw her. Old men felt young when she talked to them. Married men forgot

their chains beneath her smile. Poor men, plain men, ungifted men, felt their lot lightened after they had been introduced to Katharine, so cunningly could she draw forth from each, and having drawn forth, appreciate, the one poor talent that had power to raise its possessor an inch or two in his own sight. Of the great army of her slaves, men handsome, young, rich in every respect in the world's goods, I need not speak. Any very beautiful woman in the zenith of her youth can command this vassalage. In her willing sovereignty over classes whom shallower coquettes do not regard as worth conquering; over her own sex, children, men whose homage brought no glory; lay the special characteristic of Katharine Fane—the characteristic that must never be lost sight of if her relations with Steven's life are to be understood.

From the moment that she saw him first she knew that his heart was at her feet, and that she would never quarrel with him for his madness! She who could choose her rich and well-born slaves by dozens would not forfeit the homage even of this Kentish farmer! Of course he must marry Dot (poor little Dot should never be injured by rivalry of hers), and worship herself from afar, and with worship much too reverential for Lord Petres, the least jealous of men, to take umbrage at; but he must not be let go, or not further than Zuleika, the old white cat at home, would let the mouse go who has once felt her talons unsheathed above his beating heart. Dot, to view the matter in no other light, wanted help. Dot, charming as she was to men of a different stamp, was not perhaps quite up to the simple level of Steven Lawrence. And then the ludicrous mistake which brought him



here certainly required some tact and kindness to set it right!

All this Katharine thinks as she sits, her cheek resting on her hand, her face turned away from Steven, while Dot runs on from one bit of county gossip to another, and engages his answers, not his eyes. And then she remembers how, before he came, she had told herself that his was no light fancy for her cousin, but real love: the unknown mystery of all operas and novels! She feels the clasp of his strong arms—hears his broken words—trembles under his kiss—and the blood shows under her shell-clear skin, and her head droops a little—and Steven's conquest is complete.

At about half-past eleven a carriage stopped, and a double knock came at the house-door. Dot rose to her feet; she had had to suppress several vehement inclinations to yawn during the last half-hour or so, and going quickly up to one of the windows, pulled back the curtains, and peeped out.

"Here's Bella at last! How in the world can she have sat out an Atcherley dinner till this unearthly hour?—and—and—yet, it is—Clarendon Whyte with her. How very strange!" And she ran back, and, perching herself before the glass, examined herself in it, just as she had done before Steven's arrival only with increase of eagerness.

"Bella always *does* do such extraordinary things! Clarendon Whyte is a great friend of General Dering's, Mr. Lawrence. I am sure you will get on together. He has been an immense sportsman—lions and tigers, and all sorts of big game in India. You will have so much in common, won't you?"

"I wonder whether Mr. Lawrence and Bella will

remember each other," said Katherine, with her happy knack of turning aside any excessively silly observation of Dot's. "Let me see!—ten years. Bella must have married just about the time when you left England. Ah, you will find her more changed than any of us. I won't say your name for a moment when they come, and we will see if Bella recognises you."

Steven rose to his feet as the drawing-room door opened; and a large handsome woman, with diamonds in her dark hair, and a look of Katharine in her eyes, walked up and offered him her hand.

"Mr. Lawrence I am sure," after a shake intended, thought Steven, to make him wish himself in the backwoods again, so great was the distance at which it seemed to place him. I should have known you anywhere, Mr. Lawrence, from your likeness to your—relations." Mrs. Dering was going to say "family," but remembered, just in time, that it was a word inapplicable to persons in Steven Lawrence's class of life. "Come up to the fire. Mr. Whyte, we want a great deal of warmth and sociability, after all we have been going through this evening, don't we? I hope you have tea ready for us, Kate dear?"

And throwing down her ermined cloak, Mrs. Dering turned her handsome bare shoulders carelessly upon Steven, then drawing her sister to her side, touched her cheek with her lips.

"Fancy, Kate," she said, when Katharine had shaken hands with Mr. Whyte, "Lord Petres was there, after all. He ate nothing after looking at the first remove. Was wonderfully agreeable—impossible for the Atcherleys to be offended—but never put a morsel to his lips. I asked him the reason after dinner.

'Well,' he said, 'the Atcherleys are old friends of my father's, and once a year, regularly, I dine with them—besides, I hoped Katharine would be here—but I am not in a state of health to take liberties with myself. People who would shock your whole system with half-cooked lamb, at the outset of a dinner, are capable of anything. I helped myself once to a dozen or so of green peas with fear and trembling, and even they had pepper—*pepper*—the common, gross, black pepper of our national kitchen among them. If I had been a strong man, I might have felt myself called upon to respect Mrs. Archerley's feelings, and go regularly through the poison of every course. An invalid's first duty is to himself.' Then he left the house."

Katharine laughed. "How well I can imagine his tone! It will take him a fortnight to recover from that lamb. Did you settle anything about to-morrow?"

"Lord Petres has taken a box for us at Covent Garden. I asked him to dine here and go with us, but he declined—afraid, I suppose, of more lamb and pepper, so he is to join us there, if his health is well enough; and Mr. Whyte has promised to be our escort."

While the sisters talked, Mr. Whyte was murmuring in a half-tone into Dot's ear, and Steven, unnoticed by anybody, stood still behind Mrs. Dering's shoulder. Katharine turned and raised her eyes to his. "Are you fond of music, Mr. Lawrence? If you are, I hope we shall see you in our box at the opera to-morrow evening. Patti sings in the 'Figlia.' You will not regret the trouble of going, I think."

It was not in Steven's nature to be shy or awkward, however studiously a pair of handsome shoulders might

be turned upon him. It takes a larger amount of civilization than he possessed to make a man oversensible of his own deficiencies, or over-anxious about the opinions of others. "I shall come with pleasure, Miss Fane. I am not sure whether I like music or not, but I should like, for the first time in my life, to see a London opera-house. It is very good of you to ask me."

The slightest sidelong glance of Katharine's eyes bade Mrs. Dering invite him to dinner; but Mrs. Dering did not or would not interpret the expression aright. "You will feel strange in your own country, Mr. Lawrence," she said, with glacial emphasis; "I cannot imagine any place more intensely solitary than London to a person without friends or occupation there."

"But Mr. Lawrence, if he meant to stay in town, would not be without occupation!" cried Katharine, bravely. "Dot and I would find plenty of occupation for him, you may be sure, Bella. You don't know Lord Petres, Mr. Lawrence? Well, he will call on you to-morrow, and you'll find him a capital guide about, if you don't know town well. The Charing Cross Hotel, is it not? Ah! here comes tea, and we shall begin to be a little bit sociable. Mr. Lawrence—Mr. Whyte—" introducing the two men, who each inclined his head by about a third of an inch. "Bella, as you are cold, come into my place by the fire, while I made tea." And crossing over the hearthrug, she seated herself at Steven's side, and bade him wheel a little table before her and help her in pouring out the tea.

From the day, nearly two years ago, when Katharine first promised under her sister's tutelage, to marry

Lord Petres, her word, her slightest whim, had been law in Hertford Street; for Mrs. Dering, as anxious as any woman could be to possess a peer for her brother-in-law, had in her inmost heart gravest suspicions of Katharine's fidelity, and judging of her as she judged her babies, hoped to get the nauseous dose quietly swallowed by well plying her with every imaginable sweet and toy beforehand. "Katharine has too much excellent feeling ever to allow any man's hopes to lead him too far," she was accustomed to say when intimate friends blamed her for countenancing any new flirtation of Katharine's. "There is a great difference between them in age, and Lord Petres generously desires that Kate should look upon herself as free throughout the engagement. Whatever my sister does or wishes, I countenance." So now, in rebellion to the staunchest principles of her social creed, Mrs. Dering, before five minutes had passed, found herself, willing or unwilling, forced at least to be outwardly civil to Steven Lawrence—Steven Lawrence, whom in her young days she had looked upon as very slightly removed from the ploughmen, who came in blue kerchiefs, and white smocks to Clithero Church on Sunday. That Dot, the poor first cousin, might have to marry this man she was prepared to accept as a necessity. A first cousin after marriage is but a distant relation, and it would unquestionably be better to see Dot decently planted on a Kentish farm than have her running about, a middle-aged girl, looking upon her own and Katharine's houses as her home in London. Only why make of the man, his intentions undeclared, an intimate friend? Why advertise the possible misalliance by showing him to all London at Dot's side?

With a sigh Mrs. Dering looked at the growing animation of Katharine's face, and suffered herself to listen with as good a grace as she could command to their conversation. The fancy would last a week if Kate was unopposed, she consoled herself by thinking; a fortnight if she was contradicted! Kate's fidelity to her last favourite—a poet-tailor out of Shropshire—outlived six days. A yeoman, even with Steven Lawrence's handsome face, could not surely amuse her longer. As long as no one but Clarendon Whyte was by to see, it did not matter much, after all, and perhaps, for Dot's sake, it was wise to make the poor young man feel as little frightened in his position as possible.

The poor young man, far from being frightened, waited on Katharine at her tea-making with a quiet, thorough self-possession that Mr. Whyte, through half-closed eyes, saw and disapproved of exceedingly. "Miss Fane has another slave," he remarked to Dot, for they were talking on the other side of the fire in a tone too low for the rest to overhear. "Whatever my opinion may be of your cousin's taste this time, I am glad, at least, to find that Mr. Lawrence's attentions are reserved for her, not for you, Miss Fane, as you cruelly led me to think would be the case."

Mr. Clarendon Whyte was a well-looking young gentleman, with close shaven cheeks, an ambrosial black moustache, a real or affected incapacity for pronouncing the letter "r," and a profound general distaste for smiling or being amused in any way. A young gentleman with sympathies evidently attuned to the magniloquent in common life, and who, had he been writing of himself, would probably have been

painted as a beautiful wicked seductive member of the governing classes; who, when his fancy was set upon a woman, "meant it," and before the sirocco-blast of whose passions all the conventional virtues or barriers of society were wont to wither like a parched scroll; an *homme incompris*, going the pace bravely along the down-hill road, and with secrets darkly involving many women of many lands, buried within his breast; a mysterious being prone to setting his teeth firm and giving hard laughs, and within whose eyes would burn a cruel light, such as may have burnt within the eyes of the pirate kings of old, when resolving to carry off another man's wife, or commit any other deed of high and knightly enterprise.

This, I repeat, had Mr. Clarendon Whyte been capable of describing himself on paper, was about the measure of hero he would have pourtrayed, and this was the tone in which he ordinarily spoke of himself to women. Among men he gave it to be understood that he was one of "The Five," and as no one knew in the least what "The Five" meant, the assertion was allowed to pass current. He had been, or said he had been, in India some years back, and would speak vaguely when smoking the midnight pipe—chiefly, I think, when no old Indians were by—of the tigers he had held by the throat, and the wild boars with whom he had held single combat in the deadly jungles of Bengal. But the society of men was not much sought by Clarendon Whyte generally. The antagonism which at the first moment of their meeting sprang up between him and Steven, was an example of the sort of instinctive distaste that generally existed between Mr. Clarendon Whyte and his fellow-men.

Men, as a rule, are grossly callous to the charms of *hommes incompris*, grossly apt to call them by the commonplace name of impostors. Who was Clarendon Whyte? If he had been a tiger slayer in the jungle, why didn't he hunt a bit in England instead of dividing his time in lavender gloves between Piccadilly and the Brighton Cliff? If he had drank so hard and played so high formerly, why was he so moderate now? Where were his great relations? where was his extravagance? where were his vices? So spoke the jealous voice of men; but with a good many weak women, Dora Fane among them, this carpet-knight was a very great hero indeed. Dora was artificial to such an extent that none but artificial characters had the power to affect her. The simple manhood of a man like Steven made no mark on her perceptions. Fine dress, and big words, and martial music, and the glare of the footlights, were all required before Dot could see anything worth admiring in man or woman. Steven Lawrence's clothes were ill-cut; his boots thick; his hands brown. During the whole of this first evening he never spoke once of his adventures, or of his prowess, or of himself in any way; and at his own modest valuation Dot was quite ready to take him. This beautiful being with his faultless coat, Jouvin gloves, scented locks, and Mephistophelian whispers (only Dot never thought so long a word) she took at his. To her, Clarendon Whyte was Bayard and Mr. Rochester and Gordon Cumming all in one: a mighty hunter, a knight without fear and without reproach, and yet with unfathomable wickedness giving a gorgeous unholy glitter to his bravery and his knight-hood. Never had he, by force of contrast probably,



seemed so irresistible to her as on this evening of Steven's arrival. She knew very well indeed that Mr. Whyte never meant to marry her; knew very well that she meant, her gods aiding her, to marry Steven; and still about as much emotion as she was capable of passed through her heart at the tender reproach, real or acted, which she read in Mr. Clarendon Whyte's last words.

"I—I really don't know that Mr. Lawrence's attentions are likely to be offered to any one," she answered, with a forced laugh. "He seems more taken up with the thought of returning to Kent than anything else. You know, of course, that his land is in our parish?"

"A—market gardener, I think you said?" drawled Mr. Whyte; "or a farrier, was it? I really forget."

"A farrier!" said Dot, biting her lip with vexation. "How malicious you are, Mr. Whyte. The Lawrences are people who have lived on their own land for generations. Yeoman-farmers, we call them. People, in their class, very much respected in the neighbourhood."

"In their class—yes—no doubt," answered Mr. Whyte, smoothing his moustache into points. "People who fulfil every duty of life, of course, and eventually have their merits as fathers and husbands recorded, on white uprights, in the village churchyard. Unfortunately, their class is not our class. But forgive me, Miss Fane! What right have I to speak of this man?—what right have I to be jealous—to have any feeling at all in your affairs?"

Dot bent down her head and pretended to trace out, with one small finger, the elaborate pattern on her

Mechlin handkerchief. When she raised her face to Mr. Whyte's, tears, that were not wholly false, stood in her eyes. "I am wretched," she said, in a whisper, and with a quiver of her lip. "Why should I hide it from you? This—this—I won't say his name, but he *has* returned all the way from America for my sake. I sent him my photograph, and he's never had a night's sleep since; and as you may see for yourself, they are all trying to bring it on. Oh, Mr. Whyte, if you would but help me with your opinion! I would act in everything as you wished!"

If the expression of her face was acted, it was wonderfully pretty acting, much above Dora's general quality of art. Her lips really quivered—her tiny hands trembled as they lay clasped above the white morsel of lace on her lap. "I think I've known you long enough to look upon you as a friend," she murmured; "I think I know you well enough to be sure that you won't refuse me your advice."

Mr. Clarendon Whyte bent down over Dora Fane, and whispered his answer in her ear: an answer which made her heart beat, and her face brighten; but which, if put into words and divested of the adjuncts of *ess bouquet*, unfathomable eyes, and all the other powerful charms of Mr. Whyte's presence, came about to this: "That he supposed Miss Fane would be at the opera to-morrow—better time—er; fellow looks as if he was half listening—er." But it is surprising how aptly the imaginations of women supply language, grammar, passion, eloquence! for the men who are their peers. Fancy a simple-hearted fellow like Steven essaying to murmur imbecile monosyllables into even the most foolish woman's ear, and meeting with success! A

Bond Street tailor, Parisian perfumery, embroidered linen, and a certain prestige are all wanted before women like Dora Fane will admit the possibility of a man's fascination. The millinery department accomplished, and the seal of their own particular clique set upon it, and the eloquence of Burke would, to their apprehension, be no more comparable with the soft nothings of a Mr. Clarendon Whyte than the Venus of Milo would be comparable in their sight with a lay-figure dressed in the last new mode at Descou's. Are such women very far removed in capacity from young children, and does not a child think the squeak of his own speaking "Topsy" the finest language in the world? Does he not discover emotions which to us are mute—endearment, anger, reconciliation—in the sounds which he makes his puppet give forth? Dora Fane was, I think, no exceptionally stupid or frivolous woman, but a common example of an enormously common class; just sharp enough to supply a constant stream of passable very small talk, without an idea in life beyond the narrowest gossip of society; no sympathy with any thing or person out of herself; all the great interests of humanity a sealed book to her; all nature, earth and sea and sky, a blank—save, perhaps, as a background to herself, in Watteau-like attitudes, during the autumn months. And Dora Fane seemed to reach, with geometrical nicety, the intellectual altitude, not only of Mr. Clarendon Whyte, but of the mass of young men whom she met either in town or country. "Katharine Fane is out and out the handsomest," was the opinion invariably passed upon the comparative merits of the cousins; a woman that any fellow bent on matrimony would like to see at the

head of his table; but Dora Fane is the one to get on with at a ball. Light on hand—lots in her! the kind of girl that you never feel at a loss with anywhere.” This was the opinion of all the ornamental men, the Clarendon Whytes of the world. So poor little Dot had her groove; and it is difficult to say whether higher education, higher intelligence, would have fitted her for it more accurately.

In an hour’s time Mr. Clarendon Whyte, having drank several cups of tea and murmured more eloquence into Dora’s ear, bowed himself away; then Steven, as soon as the other was well out of the house, rose also, and took his leave.

“Don’t forget to-morrow,” said Katharine, kindly. “Lord Petres will give you the number of our box, and don’t be late, mind—not a minute after eight, or you will miss Patti in the second scene.”

She half followed him to the door, stretching out her hand to him anew as she said this; and Steven, forgetting the others, carried the beautiful gracious face, the warm hand-pressure away with him into the London streets!

“You were not too civil, Bella,” said Katharine. Dot, with a yawn, having taken herself away at once to her own room. “I thought you might very well have asked him to dinner.”

“My dearest Kate! a man in Mr. Lawrence’s position?”

“What position, Bella? What can be worse than the position of—Clarendon Whyte, say? A man who lives upon the charity of such dinner-givers as want a beauty-man to fill up an unlooked-for vacancy, and

whose birth—if birth signified!—for aught we know, may be a vast deal humbler than Steven Lawrence's."

"But until we know that it is," answered Mrs. Dering, "and as long as Clarendon Whyte goes everywhere, we may assume him to be a gentleman. Now Steven Lawrence—"

"Go on, please."

"Well, if you will have me speak plainly, Steven Lawrence is openly and avowedly out of our own class of life. Old Lawrence, of Ashcot, his grandfather—you may be too young to remember him, Kate, but I do accurately—dressed and spoke, and to all intents and purposes lived like any other common labourer, and Joshua Lawrence, as you must recollect, was only one remove better."

"Not a remove, I should think," said Katharine, quietly. "From what I have heard papa say, I should think Steven Lawrence's grandfather was a noble old man—just a simple yeoman, and so it seems to me not very far from one's idea of a gentleman! Joshua, under his wife's influence, deteriorated, because occasionally he aped being fine; and young Josh was simply shocking! with his fast, town-cut coats, and tandems, and affectations of the worst forms of London slang. Steven, I should think, would be like his grandfather as he grows older. He's a very handsome man, Bella!"

"Of a certain style. Kate. He'll look very well down at Ashcot in leather gaiters, and with a pitchfork across his broad shoulders on his way to the fields—"

"When he is Dot's husband, you mean."

Mrs. Dering coloured a little. "If Dot was to marry Steven Lawrence, or any other decent man who

could support her, you and I should be the last people, Katharine, to cavil at her taste. As years go on we shall be the people to suffer most if she does not marry, and she's looking terrible old already—I don't think I ever noticed it as I did this evening—bella donna in the eyes always must tell at last! In reality, I don't suppose that she is older than me, but in another year, if she goes on as she has done lately, she'll look fifty, you'll see, Kate."

"A pleasant prospect for Mr. Lawrence!" said Katharine, "though, I must say, I think we are arranging their marriage a little prematurely. I don't know that it's a positive certainty Steven Lawrence wants to marry into our family at all."

"He must want it," said Mrs. Dering, decisively. "All men of that class want to marry above them if they have a chance. Besides, Dot will have a thousand pounds paid down to her on her wedding-day, and a thousand pounds, after the manner in which the land has been neglected of late years, will be a very nice sum for Lawrence to put upon his farm. He would never have written to her as he did unless he meant something; and the way he held aloof from her to-night shows, from a man like that, what he feels."

"Does it, indeed?" said Katharine. "Then, men 'like that' have a very odd way of showing their feelings! May I ask, Bella—knowing that Steven Lawrence would be here—why you brought Mr. Whyte home with you? If we want Dot to marry Steven Lawrence, or any one else, it seems to me that to have Mr. Clarendon Whyte hanging about her as he does is the very last way to attain our object."

"I brought him—because he wished to come!" an-

swered Mrs. Dering, carelessly. "The reason for which I ever have him at the house at all, Clarendon Whyte has the most ill-natured tongue in London when he chooses, and—"

"You are afraid of him!" cried Katharine, as her sister hesitated. "Now, that is a thing I never can understand in you, Bella. Why be afraid of anybody? What can Mr. Clarendon Whyte, or any other man, say to hurt you and the children? I'm afraid of no one, I'm happy to say, and I never shall be."

"Wait till you have seen as much of life as I have, Kate," said Mrs. Dering. "A woman can never be above caring for the opinion of the world."

"We are speaking of Clarendon Whyte," said Katharine. "I should be proud of the ill-opinion of a world made up of Clarendon Whytes. He is a *petit-mâitre*. Thank heaven, our English language does not stoop to coin a word for such men! Could anything be more detestable than his manner to Steven Lawrence, a guest in your house, Bella? However, Lord Petres will make up for it. Lord Petres, so much I know of him, will be just as courteous to a man of Lawrence's birth as he would be to a prince. Lord Petres shall call on him to-morrow."

"My dear Katharine!"

"My dear Bella, go off to your bed, please, and don't try to argue with me. I am going to write a note to Lord Petres this instant, to be sent to him the first thing to-morrow. You are not thinking, at this time in the morning, of interfering with my love-letters, are you, Bella?"

"I think it quite unnecessary to make so much of Steven Lawrence," said Mrs. Dering; "and if it was

any one but you, Kate, I certainly should argue. We might wait, at least, till we are sure of Dora's mind before exhibiting him to every one we know as our future cousin. However, it won't last, Kate!" This was a parting shaft as Mrs. Dering prepared to leave the room.

"Take this backwoodsman to the opera, get Lord Petres to walk with him arm and arm down Piccadilly, ask him to dinner—I give you *carte blanche*, my dear—and see if you will have had enough of the man in three days or not? 'Le Roi est mort—vive le Roi!' is never more applicable than to your favourites, Katharine. A fortnight ago, do you remember how angry you were with me for not taking the poet-tailor to drive with us in the Park?"

"I remember," said Katharine. "We took Clarendon Whyte instead: the tailor's block instead of the tailor himself. Good night, Bella."

For five or six minutes after she was alone Katharine Fane stood motionless, with clasped hands and downcast face, in the place beside the hearth where Mrs. Dering had left her; then suddenly she stooped, picked up the bunch of faded violets that Steven had thrown away, and raised them to her face. Some sweetness was in them still; and Katharine held them a minute or more (could Steven have known it!) close to her lips; then, one by one, picked them asunder, and threw each, with a little quick scornful gesture, into the fire.

"Steven Lawrence," she thought, half speaking his name aloud. "Lawrence of Ashcot, to have—have mistaken me for Dot and I obliged to forgive him!



Dot shall never know what a humiliating part I have had to play for her sake."

And then she crossed to a writing-table, and, without hesitating for a word, wrote the following note to her lover:

"MY DEAR LORD PETRES,—Steven Lawrence, the young farmer I told you of, arrived from America to-day. Will you call on him please to-morrow morning, and show him some little kindness, if it won't bore you too much! He is at the Charing Cross Hotel. I'm glad you enjoyed the Atcherleys' dinner. Thanks for the box for to-morrow.

"Your affectionate,  
"KATHARINE.

"Let Steven Lawrence know the number of the box. You remember the little romance I told you of, about him and Dot?"

## CHAPTER VII.

### Steven's Rival.

STEVEN walked along the London streets that night like a man walking in his sleep. The gas, and the faces the gas shone upon; the crowds streaming out from the different theatres; the flaring open-windowed supper-rooms—the whole outside midnight brilliancy of the civilization from which he had been divorced so long, were present before him; but only as the narrow ledge along which he treads in unconscious safety is present before the bodily perceptions of the sleep-walker.

All that Steven saw in the spirit was Katharine's smile; all that he felt was the parting pressure of her hand; and with his heart fixed on her, like Christian's on the shining figures at the gate, he smoked his cigar quietly along Piccadilly and the Hay-market; then took a turn or two up and down the Strand, and when he got back to the Charing Cross Hotel and to his rest, just fell asleep as placidly as he used to do in the woods with his saddle under his head for a pillow, dry leaves and moss for his bed, and heaven above for his roof!

Not until the next morning came: not until he had dressed and gone down into the great bare coffee-room, where two or three lonely men like himself stood dismally looking out, as far apart from each other as possible, through the windows: did the intoxication of Miss Fane's presence begin to pass away, or Steven to ask himself, with a start, what fool's part this was that he was playing? Miss Fane possessed a gracious smile, a beautiful hand—belonging to whom? Standing, with his arms moodily folded at the farthest window in the room, Steven occupied himself for half-an-hour or more over the solution of this pleasant problem, the bearing it was likely to have upon his own life—and so rapt in his own thoughts was he, that a waiter bearing a card upon a salver, and with a marked access of respect in tone and manner, had to address him three times before he could be made to understand that a gentleman had called to see him, and was now waiting at the coffee-room door.

"Lord Petres," said Steven, stooping to read, but not touching the card, and with the blood rising to his face—a second before he had been wishing Lord

Petres in a very different place to the Charing Cross Hotel. "Ask him in, of course. Didn't you know I was here?"

Upon which the waiter went out, with fine breeding hiding the card in his own hand on the road so that my lord should not see the ignorant contumely with which it had been received; and a minute later ushered up my lord himself, hat in hand, along the coffee-room to the place where Steven, his back to the fire, his handsome head well in the air, stood and waited for him superbly.

Lord Petres, whose life for the last five and twenty years had been spent as much in Paris as in London, possessed, with plenty of good English heartiness, all the fluent easy graces of a Frenchman in such matters as salutation and self-introduction; and Steven, quick as men of his class always are, in recognising the presence of a gentleman, felt half his prejudices disarmed in a moment against Katharine's lover.

"How are you, Lawrence?" shaking his hand; "very glad indeed to see you in England. Ten years you've been away—ah! you'll find a good many things changed; climate same as ever, you see. Thank you," as Steven pushed up an arm-chair for him, "but not too near the fire. I'm in very delicate health, Lawrence, and these east winds play the mischief with me. If you will let me, I'll take off my scarf." Saying which he sat down, unbuttoned his great-coat, and took off an enormous woollen shawl, which was tightly wrapped round his throat and face. "I have Wentworth for my chest—but I believe in none of them—and he tells me my left lung is touched, and I must shield myself from fog—morning fog especially;

and I've Bright for my liver, and he tells me I must walk constantly in the fresh air—morning air, especially; so between them I'm reduced, as you see, to traversing the streets like a mummy. If you have a good constitution, Lawrence, thank Heaven for the best of gifts. You see in me a wreck—a complete wreck."

And Lord Petres smiled—a feeble, pleasant little smile; and taking off a pair of lined seal-skin gloves, held out his hands, fragile and white as a woman's, towards the fire.

Steven gazed down at him in a sort of wonder, and without finding a word to utter.

"I must strike you as looking ill, I am sure," said Lord Petres, earnestly. "People who see me often of course are no judges, and I'm so harassed and tossed about by the conflicting opinions of the surgeons, that to have the fresh opinion of a stranger, like yourself, would be worth anything to me. Now, do I look to you seriously diseased? meeting me, without prejudice of any sort, would you say, 'that man's liver is gone,' or not? I should be excessively obliged to you, Lawrence, if you could collect your thoughts on the subject and answer me honestly."

"Well, I'm not much used to sickness myself," said Steven; "and another thing, I'm so accustomed to live among men with skins tanned as brown as my own, that every one I see in cities is likely to strike me as pale-faced. Certainly, seeing you for the first time, I should say—"

"Lawrence, I ask you, solemnly, not to hesitate."

"Well, then, I should say I thought you had something the matter with you; but of course it would be

beyond me in every way to guess what your complaint was."

"Ah!" cried Lord Petres, with resignation, "if the doctors would only confess as much. If they would accept my wretched state of health as a fact, and not attempt to theorise upon it, what I should be saved, I don't speak from a commercial point of view only—what I should be saved in pernicious drugs, fruitless deprivations, early rising! Lawrence, you have, I know, been leading a wild kind of life of late—the only life fit for a man to live—and until you get into a state like mine, a state of chronic dyspepsia, aggravated by all that science can effect, you'll never know what civilization is. I am a martyr to erroneous British systems, past and present. My wretched digestion I inherit from men whose powers were exhausted by our national kitchen; my present aggravated condition has been achieved by the drugs of our national pharmacopœia. It's the fashion to say that England in a hundred years will have sunk into insignificance through the exhaustion of her coal. I'll tell you my opinion, sir; England, in half the time, will have passed into a state of decadence through her melted butter. I speak strongly on this point because I feel about it strongly. A nation as behindhand as England in the first essential art of civilization, must have in her constitution the deadliest seeds of decay. You agree with me?"

Lord Petres was a small man with a snow-white solemn face; ink-black hair, already worn upon the forehead and temples; a slow syllabic fashion of talking (or rather enunciating; he never spoke save to give out thoroughly well-digested opinions), and cer-

tain little marked eccentricities of dress and gait that for five and twenty years, at least, had made him a well-known character in the streets of London and Paris. A valetudinarian from humour rather than necessity, the employment of every hour of the twenty-four was appointed by him beforehand. His life was regular as a dial. Exercise, meals, digestion, study; the society of men; the society of women; everything with Lord Petres had its allotted season and time of duration; and the only thing ever known to ruffle him was when any of the unavoidable chances or changes of human life sent him, perforce, an inch or so out of his accustomed orbit.

In the first days of his engagement to Katharine Fane—an engagement, it is just to say, entirely brought about by Mrs. Dering, not by either of the principal people concerned in it: marriage had ever been the one point in social economy upon which Lord Petres' opinions were hazy, if not positively unfavourable—in the first days of his engagement, following conventional decrees rather than any natural impulse, Lord Petres really suffered the even tenor of his life to be upset. Suffered his forenoon studies to be broken in upon; took exercise when he should have digested; digested, or rather did not digest, when he ought to have taken exercise. On one great occasion, the effects of which he says he will bear with him to his grave, allowed himself to be carried away to a high tea at half-past six, and to the Lyceum Theatre and Mr. Fechter afterwards. But this was the last day of Lord Petres' love-making. With the frankness that was his nature, and with great delicacy, he explained to Katharine the next afternoon, how utterly wild and im-

possible it was that this state of things could continue. "In accepting me," he said, "you have conferred on me the highest compliment that can be conferred on any man, but to clothe a beggar in purple would be a doubtful benefit if, at the same time, you deprived him of his daily food. Regularity, to a shattered frame like mine, is what food and drink are to the healthy. You are too unprejudiced, Miss Fane, I am sure to hold to any of those empty forms and ceremonies which the common run of persons in our position seem to look upon as necessary."

And Katharine, with suspicious readiness, having given him back his liberty, Lord Petres' life from that hour flowed back into its accustomed channels. He wrote her charming little aphoristic letters, touching slightly on love, when they were parted. When they were in London together, spent three quarters of an hour regularly, each afternoon, in her society; and in every other respect led precisely the same life as if no Katharine Fane existed. Balls and operas, save on the rarest occasions, had never been his habitude. In his way, and as much as a man to whom gastronomy is the crowning object of life can be said to study, Lord Petres studied: read up, that is to say, from about one in the day till three, in whatever for the time being was his pet idea—religious, social, or political—and made annotations upon his reading for the great work into which during the last twenty years his opinions had been accumulating. At four, regularly, he walked; the length of the Boulevards des Italiens in Paris, once up and down Regent Street and the entire length of Piccadilly in London. At six, the club—for one hour. At five and twenty minutes past

seven to a second—dinner. In the evening, save when his friends dined with him, the club again; and in his bed by twelve.

There was thus, strictly speaking, no margin left for female society in the programme of his existence, save by infringing on the hours of exercise, or of the club, before dinner. In his youth, he said, he had amassed quite sufficient facts in connection with that branch of human life. The work fitted for a man's middle years in matters of this nature was to condense, and theorise from the experience of the past. And his engagement to the most beautiful woman in London had, as I have said, been insufficient to swerve him for longer than a week from this opinion.

Among men his popularity was universal. In his own set, and outside of it, among Englishmen and Frenchmen, among Protestant bishops, and Papist priests, no man was ever heard to speak a bad word of little Lord Petres. A certain sturdy independence formed, perhaps, the basis of this popularity. A man, governed by the conventionalities, must perforce, and from the very essence of his creed, sacrifice his friends sometimes. Nothing but death could, by possibility, destroy one of Lord Petres' friendships. Let a man he had once called his friend have exhausted every conceivable folly, have spent the last shilling of his fortune, Lord Petres, until the police or the bailiffs had him, would just as soon walk arm in arm with the poor fellow down St. James's Street as though he were the honestest or the wealthiest man of his acquaintance. He was no more a respecter of reputations than of persons. When he liked a man—it would be more accurate to say, when a man suited him as a com-



panion—lack of character, of fortune, or of birth, was to Lord Petres a matter of the most profound and thorough indifference. There was no affectation, no assumption, of any generous feeling whatsoever in this. The representative of one of the oldest and wealthiest Catholic families in the kingdom, it really never occurred to Lord Petres, as it does to self-made men, to inquire whether his friends were well-born or not. A thorough philosopher, after his own small fashion, he was beautifully, genuinely, indifferent to all vices and to all virtues that did not directly interfere with himself. Had the best friend he possessed burst in upon him with some tale of disgrace or ruin at dinner-time, the best friend would, I believe, have received scanty compassion at Lord Petres' hands. A man, he said of himself, whose troubled secretions scarcely permitted him to digest, under the most favourable circumstances, was not to be wantonly molested by any of the smaller accidents of life at the most important hour of the twenty-four. But let his friend wait for a fitting and decent season wherein to ask his advice, and Lord Petres would not only give it—very excellent advice too!—but be quite ready to walk arm in arm with the delinquent before every club-window in town, could such public demonstration of friendship be of service to him. And men, knowing exactly how he must be taken, respected both his foibles and himself. Thoroughness, whether in a missionary priest or in a sybarite epicurean, cannot exist without making its weight felt. Little Lord Petres was thorough to the core. You could predict, with mathematical certainty, how he would act towards you in any position in which you or he could be placed. As he had been for the last

five-and-twenty years, so he would continue in valedudinarianism, friendship, love of eating, shape of hats, and general philosophy to the last. And in an age of garish haste and hurry like the present—an age when the majority of human institutions seem to have about as much chance of abiding as the bits of glass in a kaleidoscope—the contemplation of a character like this carries with it a charm to which men, amidst the turmoil and fever of their own lives, can scarcely fail of being sensible.

Lord Petres' white face, his placid little smile, his philosophic little mind (less agitated ordinarily about passing political events than about the probable state of the world in the year 2,000), the very shape of the hat you know so well, seemed always to bring to you a sense of repose and stability whenever you came across him. Some one said once that Lord Petres and Nôtre Dame were the only things in Paris that M. Hausmann had not been able to metamorphose. Progressive and republican, theoretically, to the most Utopian degree, he was, in his own person, the very incarnation of Conservatism. With views that rivalled the broadest German school in theology, he confessed and went to mass regularly every Easter. With theories in politics outstripping Bright and Beales, he attended scrupulously in the House whenever the Conservative party, to which he traditionally belonged, required his vote. "Few things that a man does," he would say, "have the smallest effect, one way or the other, on the world's progress, but the most insignificant person can help or retard progress by his thoughts." And so, securing peace to himself by outward allegiance to the beliefs in which he had been reared, Lord

Petres had worked on and on, during half his lifetime, at his great book on reform: a book which, when published—fifty years after his death, his will directs—will, I suspect, find the world yet unripe for the changes, social, religious, and political, which it advocates.

“You go with me, Lawrence, I hope? There can scarcely be a worse sign for a nation than this, that in the nineteenth century it has not conquered the rudiments of the first great art of civilization. In our day we have had our use, as the mammoth and the mastodon had once, but we have not in us the germs of further progress. By help of our coal, and with brute force or dogged obstinacy, we have beaten iron into shape, and woven cotton into cloth, for the use of other nations; but there we stop. We can sustain life, but we cannot render it endurable. We furnish the knife to slay the bullock, the cloth for the table, and then we serve up the beast, charred and gory, at our national feasts. You agree with me?”

“I believe I agree with the English people generally,” said Steven, not without a smile. In the levity engendered by youth, ignorance, and unbounded digestion, cooking to him was the least important of subjects. “For myself, a venison steak broiled over a wood-fire, a buck’s head baked in an earth oven, a partridge or quail quickly roasted, and a snatch of cassava bread, have been my diet for years, with a mug of black coffee, as long as our coffee held out, to wash it down.”

A look almost of excitement came across Lord Petres’ impassive face. “Lawrence,” said he, earnestly, “I’m delighted to have met you! Sit down, pray. This

conversation is most interesting to me. At the present moment I am endeavouring to work out an idea—not original, nothing's original—but an idea too much neglected by writers on art generally, which is that the perfection of cookery is, in many cases, to be sought, not by striving after new combinations, but by reverting to the instinctive, untaught science of the simple hunter in the woods. Your remark confirms all that I have been writing on the subject. You speak of a venison steak smoking hot from the embers, of small game quickly roasted, of a buck's head cooked by slow and gradual heat. Good God, sir! do you not know that all this is the *ne plus ultra* of intuitive science? bearing out with accuracy the axiom of the immortal Savarin, that 'On devient cuisinier mais on naît rôtiisseur.'"

"I don't know French," said Steven, "except a few words I picked up in the Canadian backwoods once; but I know our food used to taste deuced good to us in the forests or out prairie-hunting. Still, I can't say I ever enjoyed anything more than some cold beef and pickles that I ate when I landed in Southampton yesterday. After living on wild flesh as I have done for years, I believe plain English beef and mutton will be a treat to me, ill-cooked or well-cooked."

Lord Petres looked with a sort of mild envy at the yeoman's iron-knit frame and healthy weather-tanned face. "Youth, and the perpetual spring of spirits arising from good digestion, make you speak like that, Lawrence. You have lived in pure air, eaten digestible food, and abstained from the poison of the wine-merchants so long that you can speak lightly of the worst cares and burthens of civilization. Let me

solemnly warn you not to tax your digestive powers too far. Even with the finest constitution, the stomach will give way in time before the meats—I refrain from calling them dishes—of ordinary English life. Cold beef and pickles, for once and under certain conditions of the stomach, may be a dinner for a prince. But cold beef and pickles for a year—”

“Would be food as good as I require,” said Steven, cheerily; “varied sometimes by spinach and bacon, or a cut at a juicy leg of mutton, with a glass of home-brewed ale afterwards. Good cookery—your fine French fricasees and wines—would be lost upon me, I guess.”

Lord Petres looked thoughtful for a minute. “May I ask you, Lawrence,” he said, at last, “what you are thinking of ordering for your breakfast this morning? You must not think me impertinent—I have a special object in making the inquiry.”

“Ordering for breakfast!” said Steven, opening his blue eyes. “Well, I don’t know, I’m sure. I never thought about it. Whatever they give the other fellows, I suppose. I’m not at all particular.”

“Then will you come and breakfast with me? If you had ordered anything I would not have asked you, for I know myself there’s nothing more painful than to submit to another man’s taste when you have already made up your mind, prepared your faculties, as it were, for any particular task of assimilation. I’ve got a French fellow whose powers I should like you to give me your opinion of; and, as I don’t breakfast till eleven, we can take a stroll, if you are so minded, on our way to my lodgings.”

The French fellow was an artist who, it was cal-

culated, profited by about one-seventh of his master's yearly income; an artist who, as Lord Petres presently explained to Steven, exercised an autocratic sway not only over his table, but over every social condition of his life.

"But for Duclos, indeed, Lawrence," he said, as they were walking away from the hotel, "you would probably have now found me a much happier man than I am. Considerations connected with this rascal alone prevented me from breaking up my bachelor establishment last February. I speak to you as an old friend of the family, you understand?"

Steven walked on in silence, his steady stride bearing little Lord Petres along much as a powerful steam-tug would convoy a light schooner yacht. Considerations connected with a French cook prevented Katharine Fane at this minute from being Lady Petres! and he suffered the man's arm to rest in his, was accepting his first offer of hospitality, nay, more, felt in his heart that Lord Petres was a good fellow, and that there was sympathy between them such as, when he looked at Clarendon Whyte last night, he would have sworn could never exist between him and any fine London gentleman extant! Was Lord Petres above or below his jealousy, or what?

"If it wouldn't inconvenience you, Lawrence, would you be good enough to slacken your pace a little? Thank you. In the delicate state of my different organs, I am expressly forbidden ever to get out of breath. Yes, I speak to you as a friend of the family. I know you have been acquainted with the Fanes for years, longer than I have myself, indeed. Now, how

do you find them looking? Dora is prettier than ever, isn't she?"

"I don't believe I remember her enough to say," answered Steven, promptly. "She certainly is not very good-looking now, to my mind. I don't care for these little women like dolls."

"*Voilà où nous en sommes!*" thought Lord Petres. "Katharine at her usual occupation! I believe I agree with you, Lawrence; still as a little woman, and in a certain style, Dora Fane is to be admired. She always seems to me so well suited for an entresol. Your big women dwarf low rooms, and require a massive style of furniture, frequently out of keeping with your establishment. Now, Katharine Fane—— But 'tis a shame to talk of handsome women fasting, and in an east wind. The subject should be introduced, like a glass of Tokay or Grande Chartreuse, in the first and pleasantest stage of digestive reverie."

"East wind or west, on a full stomach, or a fasting one, I could give my opinion of Miss Fane," said Steven, stoutly. "She is handsomer than any woman I ever saw before, and seems to me simple and good as she is handsome."

"May the Lord help you!" thought Lord Petres, giving a look of pity at Steven's flushing cheek. "Katharine Fane starting with the rôle of simplicity on a man like this. They are charming women, all three—Dora, Katharine, and Mrs. Dering; Mrs. Dering, especially, has the finest-cut shoulders of any woman I know. You couldn't have better people to run about with, if you wish to see a little of how we all live in London. By-the-bye, I've a message for you—some-

thing about a box at one of the theatres this evening."

"Miss Fane was good enough to ask me last night," said Steven, "and I accepted; but I don't believe I can go. I don't know how men dress in cities. I've nothing belonging to me but a couple of rough suits I bought in Vera Cruz before I sailed." To a Mr. Clarendon Whyte, Steven's pride would never have allowed him to make the confession; but something about Lord Petres set him as thoroughly and unconsciously at his ease, as he had been over-night in the society of Katharine Fane.

"At the London opera it's the fashion, and a very disgusting fashion too, to go in full dress—white tie, black suit, like the young gentlemen in the haberdashers' shops. Now I don't think a coat of mine would fit you?"

"Not exactly," said Steven, with his hearty laugh.

"And the time is short for getting anything made. However, I'll tell you what we can do: we'll walk round to my tailor in Bond Street, and, if he can do nothing for you himself, he'll tell us exactly who will. Everything can be had, of a kind, in London in half an hour, if one only knows where to go for it."

The grand Bond Street tailor, who, on the strength of Steven's own merits, would probably not have taken the trouble to make a coat for him at all, was all complacency and condescension to the friend of Lord Petres; not only taking the yeoman's measure for a morning suit and frock-coat, but faithfully promising that he should be in a position to appear at Covent Garden that night. This settled, Lord Petres took



out his watch and found that there was exactly time, with two minutes to spare, for them to reach his lodgings by eleven o'clock.

"A great philosopher has said," he remarked, taking Steven's arm again, "that the discovery of a new dish does far more for human happiness than the discovery of a new star; and it always seems to me that the least we can offer to men who spend their life in culinary research, is the poor return of punctuality. Since Duclos has been good enough to cook for me I've never been late yet, and have had no cause to regret my attention to his feelings. Only once did he make me wait, and that was in Paris, on the evening after the coup d'état. He kept me more than half an hour; but you see, Lawrence, a good many of his relations had been shot in the course of the day, and I suppose—well," said little Lord Petres, "I suppose, in periods of political excitement, much must be forgiven—to a Frenchman."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A Question for the Future.

LORD PETRES' "lodging" consisted of a first-floor suite of rooms, on the sunny side of St. James's Street; rooms furnished with such luxury as Steven had never seen or imagined in his life. Velvet-piled carpets, Flemish hangings, Venetian glass, Florentine bronzes—everything most costly and most artistic of its kind, was to be found in Lord Petres' bachelor lodgings. Piled-up wood-fires—one of his eccentricities was an utter intoleration of coal—blazed on every hearth. A profusion of flowers in the double windows, frescoed

medallions of fruits and garlands on the walls, Louis Seize furniture, tapestried in white and gold, gave the rooms almost the lightness and grace of a Parisian apartment. In a small inner cabinet, lined with books and pictures, Lord Petres' morning room and study, the breakfast equipage was laid on a little round table drawn close beside the fire, before which an enormous Persian cat, with a leather collar round his neck, lay outstretched and asleep.

"You are hungry, I hope, Lawrence?" said Lord Petres, when he had taken off his wraps. "This accursed fog has not poisoned your system to such an extent that, like me, you are indisposed from taking food?"

"Not in the least," said Steven. "I have been in much worse fogs for weeks together, in the fall, and never felt my hunger decrease in the slightest. When you have seen me eat, you will say that mine isn't the kind of appetite to be affected by such small accidents as east wind or fog."

And he took his place, not without a feeling of misgiving, at the little table, whose Sèvres and silver, and fragile graceful *épergnes* of flowers, all spoke more plainly, he thought, of "fine French *fricasees*" and refinement than of the good robust kind of meal which at this moment his keen morning appetite cried aloud to receive.

"If you care to know what we are going to eat, here is the bill of fare," said Lord Petres, handing him a slip of rose-coloured paper that lay beside his own plate. "With an enfeebled constitution like mine, it's necessary that I should know what is coming, in order to select the one or two dishes that may happen

to tempt my fancy. To a man in good health, who is in the hands of a decent cook, I always say eat straight on, heedless of the past and of the future. Surprise is better than anticipation to robust nerves and an unvitiated digestion."

"Whether I look at the list or whether I don't, 'twill be much the same to me," said Steven, vainly endeavouring to decipher a syllable of the little cramped French hand, in which the menu was written; "I'm never good at handwriting, and if I could make out a syllable of this, which I can't, I should not know what it was about. *Roti*, is French for roast, I remember, and *cuit à la grille*, for broiled. That is about as much as I know, and if you were to give me a hundred pounds I couldn't tell you how to spell either. I am a man wholly without education, Lord Petres," laying the paper down, and looking steadily, yet not without a heightened colour, at his host.

"Without book education," said Lord Petres, in his pleasant little way, "and a d—— good thing for you, Lawrence! Life is the only book I ever got any knowledge worth a shilling from yet. When you get to my age and can no longer study life at first hand, it will be quite time enough for you to study it in books."

The clock on the mantelpiece, accompanied with mathematical precision by three or four clocks in the adjoining apartments, now struck eleven, and at the ninth stroke, exactly, the door opened, and the first course of the breakfast was brought in. "Help yourself Lawrence," said Lord Petres. "You must excuse me from eating. I can talk, if it affords you any amusement, but I have not the least appetite to-day,"

And so, during the first course and the second, through *fricandeaux* and *salmis*, fish, flesh, and fowl, disguised under every delicate form by which art could seek to tempt an appetite no longer to be tempted, did Steven eat alone! Lord Petres occasionally taking a tiny morsel on his plate, and playing with it with his knife and fork, but not swallowing an ounce of food during the whole meal. When the fruit was put upon the table, he counted out twelve strawberries on his plate, ate them, with a quarter of a slice of French roll, and drank one glass of Madeira. The first dish that had tempted the worn-out sated epicure was, after all, the dish for which M. Duclos' art had done nothing, and nature all!

Of Steven it is not too much to say that an entirely new world had opened before him during the hour or so which Lord Petres' breakfast had occupied. Just as to eyes that had never seen the beauty and the grace of womanhood, the magic of Katharine's presence last night was as a glimpse of some hitherto-unimagined Paradise; so to a palate that for ten years had never tasted any save the simple food of the wilderness, this perfection of gastronomic art was a new and overpowering revelation of life's possibilities. At the risk of lowering Steven in some readers' interest, I must say boldly that his temperament was essentially that of a *bon vivant* by predestination. Fresh in heart and body as a child, he was keenly, fervidly ready for every pleasant thing the world could afford him—from the smiles of beautiful lips down even to the *cotelettes* and the *filets*, the sauces and the *salmis*, of Monsieur Duclos. When he spoke an hour ago of cold beef and pickles contenting him, he spoke

in the same kind of blind ignorance which used to lead him, before he got Katharine's photograph, into thinking every robust, fresh-coloured young woman he saw in the back-wood settlements a divinity. We are too much accustomed to confuse want of experience with want of capacity. Steven, with the present ignorance of a Red Indian, had in him perceptions only needing practice to ripen into the perfection of refined taste; perceptions more keenly delicate than those of half the ultra-civilized men you meet. His limited vocabulary and modest distrust as to the worth of his own opinions withheld him from much speech; but in the few words he did speak—in the fine discrimination he showed respecting sauces—in the very way he tasted his wine before he drank it, Lord Petres recognised a man to whom, as education advanced, food might not be the mere gross sustenance of animal existence, but a sentiment—a science: an end, not a means in life. And the predilection which, from the first moment of seeing him, he had experienced towards Steven Lawrence, increased proportionately.

After breakfast came coffee—a subject on which Steven knew sufficient not only to feel but to speak; then tobacco; finally, when the one o'clock sun had slowly pierced through the London mist and was filling the rooms with friendly warmth and brightness, Lord Petres led the way back to the subject he had pronounced too sacred for fog and east wind in the forenoon.

“We were speaking, I think, of Mrs. Dering, Lawrence, when we broke off? Let us resume the subject in order. Mrs. Dering, I was observing to you, has

the finest-cut shoulders of any woman in London. Did you remark them?"

"I remarked little else," said Steven. "Mrs. Dering turned her shoulders upon me from the moment she entered the room, I think, until I left it."

"And you admired them?"

"I don't admire her. I don't care for these very big women."

"Any more than for these very small ones? I see how it is, Lawrence. With Katharine Fane in the room, you have no eyes for any other woman. Her speciality is to eclipse. Dora Fane and Mrs. Dering are both, critically speaking, as good-looking as she is; yet neither of them has a chance beside her. Something rather in her manner than in her face, I think?"

Steven smoked on in silence at one of his host's admirable regalias. He had not philosophy enough to enter upon a discussion of Katharine's charms with Katharine's lover.

"And Mr. Whyte—Mr. Clarendon Whyte—was there too, of course. Can the rose be without its attendant thorn? You get on with him, I hope, Lawrence? Any man who is to be much in Hertford Street must get on with Mr. Clarendon Whyte, just at present."

"I don't suppose I shall be much in Hertford Street," said Steven. "I am going down to my farm to-morrow, and shall have plenty to keep me there. One thing is certain—I don't get on, and never should, with Mr. Whyte. These high-falutin, contumacious kind of gentlemen," he added, with kindling eyes, "are no company for me."

It was the first un-English expression Steven had made use of, and Lord Petres was pleased with it to such an extent that he almost laughed. "You are right, you are quite right," said he. "The fellow is an impostor; Brummagem muscularity, Cockney affectation of roué-ism—worst kind of all imposture—and you would never have anything to say to each other in a dozen years. Put him on shooting or tiger-hunting some day before an audience, and see what you make of him. I am told by persons who read such works," he continued, "that Mr. Whyte models, himself on a style of young gentlemen much in vogue at present in novels which confirms me in my distaste for that branch of literature. Still, women tolerate him. There is no denying it, Lawrence, women do as a rule tolerate all impostors."

"Miss Dora Fane seemed to have a good deal to say to Mr. Whyte," answered Steven. "I don't believe either of the other ladies said six words to him during the whole time he was there."

"Katharine would not, certainly. Katharine has opinions above those of her sex in most things. Now Mrs. Dering—you did not see General Dering, I suppose, Lawrence? No, I should not think you ever would. You will be admitted to the set of Mrs. Dering's friends who never see General Dering, and a great mercy for you. Nothing so painful in a house like that—I speak from knowledge—as to be on the heavy list, and forced to assist at the heavy sacrifices which the poor old General calls dinner-parties."

Steven was silent. There was profanity to him in the lightness with which Lord Petres canvassed the merits and demerits of Katharine's relations.

"Mrs. Dering is a clever woman," went on Lord Petres, watching his face. "A woman the world speaks well of, and a very excellent chaperon for the Miss Fanes. You and I may be perfectly frank in speaking of all this, Lawrence. I, as you know, am going to marry Katharine; you, as I surmise, are in a position to be congratulated with respect to Dora, and—"

"I congratulated about Dora Fane!" cried Steven, his face a-fire. "I think not, Lord Petres. Whoever told you so was mistaken. I know nothing more unlikely than Miss Dora Fane becoming my wife."

"Well, then, I congratulate you still more," said Lord Petres, pleasantly. "Will you hand me over the tobacco? Thanks. Marriage is a great mystery, Lawrence," preparing a delicate cigarette as he spoke, "and, unless a man be specially gifted, he is wise not to attempt its solution. What can a single life do towards throwing light upon a problem which has vexed every political economist from the time of Moses—to go back no farther—till our own?"

"All I want to have light thrown upon is my own life," said Steven. "I know nothing of problems or political economy, but—"

"You believe enforced companionship with one human creature until you die would promote your happiness? Ah, I think I believed that once—very long ago. All men have believed it, I suppose, at some stage, more or less crude, of their experience."

"I can't imagine a man marrying who does not believe it," said Steven, warmly. "I can't understand a man engaging himself to marry any woman unless he believed that it would add to his happiness to possess her."



Lord Petres sent down a cloud of smoke with grave thoughtfulness through his nostrils. "What is happiness, Lawrence? What, for the matter of that, is possession? How much of a woman can a man call his? Does she belong most to the husband, whom she sees for three hours out of the twenty-four, or to the world for whom she dresses, drives, dances, and of which she dreams during the remainder? Now I am not a sentimental or a jealous man myself. Nothing would content me better in marriage than to be allowed to retain the precise habits of my present life, and for my wife to retain hers; but even my very modest scheme of happiness will, I feel, be shattered by my change of condition. I don't complain. I am going to marry. I simply accept as a fact—a fact in conformity, doubtless, with some larger law beyond my comprehension—that Duclos will leave me. I have argued; I have written, indeed, a sort of *brochure* for him, comprehending all that could be urged on both sides of the question; have twice augmented his income; but all in vain. Duclos leaves me. He has no objection, he tells me, to my future wife; not a word to say against my marriage, as a marriage. But it is a fixed principle of his life only to preside over bachelor establishments, and to this fixed principle I am to be brutally sacrificed."

"And are there no other French cooks to be had?" cried Steven. "Couldn't some artist be found with Monsieur Duclos' talents, but without Monsieur Duclos' prejudices?"

"Lawrence," said Petres, with something like a shade of colour coming into his white face, "this is a subject which you must allow me to say I feel too

strongly about to discuss at the present moment. During the period of digestion Bright has expressly forbidden me to distress myself with any painful or complicated trains of thought. I was wrong to introduce Duclos' name at all. Speak about it to Katharine, who is in robust health and able to contend with disagreeable subjects, and she will tell you the whole story of how our marriage came to be put off. Are you going to Hertford Street this afternoon?"

"I? No; I suppose not," said Steven, rising, and looking through the window. "What excuse should I have for calling again so soon?"

"My dear sir, the last thing a woman ever needs excuses for is a man's attention to herself! If you wanted an excuse, which you don't, nothing would be easier than for you to leave a bouquet or bouquets for them as they are going to the opera to-night."

"I shouldn't think Miss Fane would be likely to accept flowers sent her by me," said Steven, stiffly, but with thoroughly sincere humility. "When she was a little child, and I a lad on my uncle's farm, I used to give her and Miss Dora bunches of flowers when I met them in the lanes. But amongst children there is no disparity of class, you know."

"I know that whatever Katharine Fane was at ten, you will find her at twenty-one," answered Lord Petres; "not a single vulgar or little feeling has place in Katharine's heart, more than can be said perhaps of her sister and cousin. A duke or a plain country squire is just the same to Katharine Fane, so long as he pleases her personally. Her fault, if fault you call it, is rather coquetry, Lawrence."

A knife seemed to enter, sudden and cold, into

Steven's heart. Love has intuitions, like those of genius. Some sharpening of his faculties seemed to lay bare before the yeoman in one moment all Miss Fane's past and future life; and he knew that he was jealous of it all! "Coquetry!" he repeated, half aloud; "I should not have thought a fault like that would be charged to Katharine Fane!"

"Well, I do not consider it a fault," said Lord Petres. "The mission of all women, I take it, is to please, and the woman is most womanly who pleases best. This, of course, is looking at the subject from a one-sided point of view. When you admire a hawk, you admire it for the qualities of its kind, not taking into account the sufferings of the sparrows. Katharine Fane flirts as the men of her race have been noted for fighting, neither expecting quarter, nor giving it. She knows nothing at all of love or sentiment, except in theory, but can act them both far more prettily than life; and in a handsome woman, Lawrence, nothing compels men's admiration so certainly as a notorious incapacity for love on her side. Every man thinks he will be an exception to the general rule."

Lord Petres spoke in his usual impassive voice, but with the faint little curl generally to be noticed round his lips when the subject of love was under consideration. Steven Lawrence's heart fired. "Isn't it going too far to speak of 'incapacity,' Lord Petres? Can a woman be a woman, yet incapable of love? May not what you call her incapacity be, in fact, that she has never met with a man who so loved her as to compel her to give him back her love in payment?"

"I have not much opinion of that doctrine of reciprocity," said Lord Petres, shaking his head, and

speaking in just the same kind of tone in which he would have discussed some doubtful combination in sauces or stuffings. "Devotion and blind faith and exalted passion are very nice things, in themselves, but when they are laid before women of the world, generally end in being trodden under foot by the person to whom they are offered."

"Then the less I have to do with women of the world, and the more I keep to my farm, the better for me!" said Steven, with spirit. "I have no desire to lay down my heart for the fairest woman that ever lived to tread upon."

"If you do so, remember that I warned you," said Lord Petres, as Steven held out his hand to him. "Remember, also, that it is a great deal better to be made miserable, temporarily, by a woman who won't marry one, than eternally by a woman who will! Really, Lawrence, levity apart, I'm very glad you have no serious thoughts at all about love or marriage. Dora Fane is a pretty little woman (for an entresol) and all that, but monstrous expensive in her tastes, and about as good a companion for a man as the gilt butterfly on that clock. See every kind of life you can, and avoid as much as possible falling into the slough of British meats and wines—wines especially. A delicate palate like yours is not a gift to trifle with, and once vitiated, can never be recovered. There are not six unprofessional men in London who could have discriminated between the different vintages of Chamberlain as you did. Above all, Lawrence, keep yourself free from entanglements. In your present frame of mind, a woman who didn't love you enough, or a

woman who loved you too much, might just upset the whole remainder of your life for you."

"A woman who loved you too much." Do not call Steven a fool when I tell you that out of this commonplace remark of Lord Petres' his heart built up a presentiment of good that made him happy during the next four hours at least! Most great and desperate passions start with childish faith in omens, with childish and insensate hopes. Just as plainly as Lord Petres had shown it to him did Steven know that he was not, and never could be, aught, save a moment's pastime, to Katharine Fane. That she was a coquette; that his love, did he offer it, would be trodden by her under foot—according to the custom of all women of the world—he never thought of questioning. And yet he hoped! if those first vague brooding dreams of passion can be called hope. He was quite humble; had no suspicion of double motive in anything Lord Petres had said to him; knew that he was a thorough unqualified simpleton, and was happy—perhaps during his whole life never was so happy again as on this day. That the excellent food, the wines, the tobacco, of Lord Petres had had some influence on his mental state, is more than likely . . . but I shrink from these humiliating analyses. The May sun shone piercing clear; the east wind to Steven's healthy nerves seemed to blow with pleasant springtide freshness; and everything about the London streets looked gilded in his sight.

He walked, chance guided, when he left St. James's Street, far away east, and thought how all the noise and movement of this city life cheered a man's heart; how it called aloud to him to work, and told him what

wealth, what power was to be won by the constant will and by the strong right arm! Under ordinary circumstances a stranger, poor and alone, could scarcely listen to that city roar, I think, without remembering something of the human misery—the dead hopes, the living defeat—which is its daily burthen. But Steven was in a kind of rapture, and not a note from the great minor chord of pain and poverty and fruitless toil reached his ear. When he reached St. Paul's he turned, and with the afternoon sun shining on his face, walked leisurely back as far as Piccadilly, then through the Park to Kensington Gardens, where the great world had begun to assemble to listen to the band. How fair the women looked under the flowering chesnuts; how their delicate silks glistened in the sun; how rose and white the English faces showed in the level light! Everything Steven looked at seemed endowed with some bright and personal significance to himself to-day. All this outward glitter of wealth and pleasure—these equipages, horses, fair women—instead of crushing him as it ought to have done with a fatal sense of his own insignificance appeared to him rather as a sort of show or gala got up to celebrate his return to England and the happiness that he had found there. London was great, truly, and he small; rich, and he poor. But he was to meet Katharine to-night! Out of all this crowd could there be six other men, he wondered, as happy as himself?

As he stood, unnoticed by every one, listening to the band, his thoughts, unbidden, travelled back over the last ten years: over his fever of gold-seeking, his wanderings with Klaus in the wilderness, the simple ambitions and defeats of his hunter's life; and, with a

sudden emotion, half shame, half pity for himself, Steven knew that he had been a savage till yesterday. A savage till yesterday; and he was to meet Katharine Fane, by her own bidding, to-night! Sometimes when he and Klaus were "yarning" by the camp-fire at night, they had been wont to speculate what a man's sensations would be, who, with tastes, with wants like theirs, should abruptly be told that he had come into ten thousand a-year. Steven was realising a more intense, a more poignant alternation of fortune now; he had risen in a day from existence to life, from the sober plain of every-day contentment to the torrid heights, the restless intoxication, of passion. Was he to profit by the exchange as men usually do profit, who in maturity barter the poverty they know for riches of whose use they are ignorant? This was a question for the future.

Towards five o'clock he crossed the Park again, and made his way to Covent Garden, where he spent a sovereign on a bunch of flowers for Miss Fane: tuberoses, lilies of the valley, white rose-buds, stephanotis; flowers that his instinct told him Katherine would have chosen had she been at his side. These he carried himself to Hertford Street, and left for her.

"For Miss Fane, sir?" asked the servant.

"For Miss Fane," said Steven, turning quickly away. And so the twenty-shilling bouquet was taken up-stairs at once and given over into Dora's small hands.

They were hands to hold fast everything that came, whether by mistake or of intention, into their grasp.

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## CHAPTER IX.

## Meâ Culpâ.

MRS. DERING was a clever woman, Lord Petres had said—a woman the world spoke well of, and an excellent chaperon for the Miss Fanes. And testing cleverness, excellence, and the world's good opinion by a certain not too-exalted standard, Lord Petres was right.

At nineteen years of age, with only her youth and her handsome person for her dower, Arabella Fane, of her own free will, had promised to love, honour, and obey a man as thoroughly distasteful to her as any human creature with money could be, and nearly thrice her age, but who possessed a comfortable income (settled on her after his death) of three thousand a year; and from her wedding-day until now had acquitted herself in her position as the young wife of an old man with entire credit. She had four children, whom she did not neglect; she looked well after her husband's household; dressed better and spent less on her dress than most women; went regularly to church and the court balls; received a great deal of attention, yet never occasioned any scandal; gave subscriptions with an ungrudging spirit to such metropolitan charities as published printed reports; and had already secured for her sister Katharine one of the best matrimonial prizes in London. When the General or the children were ill, she was a sedulous nurse; when a relation died, she wore mourning for a week longer than the milliner told her was necessary; when any of her dear friends forfeited their position she cut them, if three



or four of her best acquaintances had decided to do the same—if not, she really felt it was no place of hers to be the judge of her weaker brethren. An excellent wife, mother, and friend, Mrs. Dering, in addition to her high moral qualifications, had the reputation of being one of the pleasantest women in town to sit next at a dinner-party. She possessed real intelligence, with a little of Katherine's charm of manner when she talked; could take interest enough for conversational purposes in politics, theology, hunting, art, and even literature; and had always a stock of quiet, perfectly-safe flirtation in reserve for men too stupid or too clever to be amused in any other way. Whether Mrs. Dering liked anything strongly was a question that the human being nearest to her in the world, her sister, had not yet solved. She hated two things most thoroughly—the country and poverty; and had the good taste always to speak of both in accents of decency and respect. Next to these, I think—partly perhaps, a belonging to the country, partly to poverty—she disliked her cousin Dora; but invariably asked that poor little relation to spend the six best weeks of the season in her house, from which act of self-sacrifice alone you will see that Mrs. Dering was a woman of real principles.

“If Dora does not marry,” she was accustomed to say, “Dora, after my mother's death, will have a right to look upon my house as her home.” And in saying this she was sincere. She would sooner have subjected herself to any personal annoyance than that the world should have occasion to say a near relation of Mrs. Dering's was forced to work for her bread. But I don't know that I would have cared to change places

with the poor relation whose fortune it was to live on Mrs. Dering's charity.

General Dering, happily alike for me and for the reader, spent the whole of his existence at the Senior United Service Club—a sacred retreat with which the plain history of Steven Lawrence can certainly have no concern. For thirty years of his life the old General had dined at seven: an hour which, as his wife and the Miss Fanes unanimously decreed, “broke in upon everything,” and had the additional disadvantage of being fixed. So throughout the whole of the past and present season—except on occasion of those heavy sacrifices called dinner-parties, of which Lord Petres had told Steven—General Dering, greatly to everybody's relief, had adopted the practice of dining at his club, leaving Mrs. Dering and the girls free to celebrate high tea at any hour from five to nine that happened to suit their arrangements for the evening.

“High tea is so economical, my love,” Mrs. Dering had said, when first making covert advances to her husband on the subject; “so economical, and gives such infinitely less trouble in the house. I almost think we could do without Batters if we took to it for good; and then, you see, you will never be put out of your way. Of course, for the girls' sake, I must go to these operas and balls; but that is no reason why you should be made to suffer; and you know you are ill for a week, dear, always, if you dine half an hour earlier or later than usual.”

Now, the reasons which made a movable high tea more economical than a fixed dinner are as inscrutable to me as the reasons for which the meal was called tea at all. There was never the most shadowy pretence

at tea to be seen on the table—what fashionable ladies could keep up the strength their hard life demands on such mild fluid? and mayonnaises, cold game and poultry, and raises pies, are not, in the country at least, cheaper than hot dishes. That high tea, with three young and charming women, open windows, no servants, and no master of the house, was a much pleasanter meal than a hot dinner in a hot room, with a hot butler, and a hot old General eating audibly, was incontestable; and Mr. Clarendon Whyte, and all other bachelor frequenters of the house, were loud in praise of the change, and strenuous in advocating it among disaffected young wives and revolutionary daughters elsewhere.

For a good many years past the first care of poor Mr. Clarendon Whyte's soul had been to dine gratuitously. He might prefer hot food to cold: this was a matter of detail. To make the principal meal of the day free of cost, must ever be a primary consideration in life to a gentleman who, on, say two hundred pounds a year, assumes the position of ten times that sum. And for every dinner to which he could, by possibility, have been invited under the old régime, Mr. Clarendon Whyte was invited now to at least five high teas. Always well dressed, always good-looking, always ready to be taken about to operas, balls, or concerts afterwards, Mr. Whyte, as Katharine used to say, was a very convenient honorary laquais de place of the establishment; and as he was thoroughly impartial in his attentions publicly to Mrs. Dering and the two Miss Fanes, the world had not as yet found much, matrimonial or scandalous, to say respecting the intimacy.

On this evening, when Steven was invited to meet them at Covent Garden, one of the accustomed high teas was to take place at half-past six; and at some minutes before six o'clock, Katharine Fane, already dressed as she was to be at the opera, came into the drawing-room, where Lord Petres was waiting for her. The effect of evening dress by daylight is, in most cases, a discordant one. Your sense of fitness is disturbed by some bright colour, some garish jewellery out of keeping with the sober eyes of day, that they were never meant to meet. But Katharine Fane was a woman with whom dress was always subsidiary. At a breakfast-table or in a ball-room, in a riding-habit or a court train, it was invariably Katharine herself, not the colour or shape of what she wore, that held your eyes captive. A flowing soft-hued silk, white lace drapery veiling the noble lines of arm and throat, a piece of stephanotis in her brown hair, this was her toilette now. No earrings, no bracelets, no trinket of any kind about her; no tinge of colour on the face that nature had left so perfectly in its delicate but healthy pallor.

She walked up with a smile of welcome to her lover's side, and he took her hand with the tips of his fingers, and carried it to his lips. Lord Petres had thoroughly decorous and French ideas on the subject of unmarried girls. "You are looking charming, Katharine. The way that you retain your looks in weather like this is really admirable."

"And you—how are you getting on to-day? I *am* so sorry about the east wind," said Katharine, with the prettiest air of concern imaginable. "Once this afternoon I hoped it had gone round, just an inch or two,

to the south; but I'm afraid it has got back to the old quarter again this evening."

And she drew back a window-curtain with the hand that was disengaged, and looked out at the blue sky and cold sunshine which suited her own hardy temperament so well with a shake of the head full of mournful interest.

"The wind never leaves the east till August in this country," said Lord Petres, creeping with a shiver into an arm-chair close to the fire, upon which, in nice accordant with his tastes, two or three huge pieces of wood were blazing cheerily. "It shows very good feeling in you, Katharine, always to remember my sufferings—most persons, blessed with a constitution like yours, insult me by saying that the continuance of dry weather is healthy, or good for the wheat, or the poor; as if any statistics of that nature could interest a man with a digestion like mine—but I think, really, you have had enough of them for this season. I shall go to Paris to-morrow morning."

"Paris! not to stay there?" She came quickly to his side, rested one white hand upon the arm of his chair, then turned away her face, and gave a little sigh. "Paris has more charms for you always than London, Lord Petres."

"Paris," said Lord Petres, solemnly, "has, with an equal amount of east wind, a warmer sun and less dust. On the south side of the Palais Royal, or under the chestnuts at the Luxembourg, an invalid at certain hours of the day may occasionally flatter himself into the belief that May is a summer month. Besides, Katharine—you know I am always frank with you—Duclos is Paris-sick. If I let him have three or four

weeks of Mabilles and the theatres now, he will, perhaps, be contented with England later on in the season. You understand?"

"I understand that Duclos is a tyrant," said Miss Fane; "for as to Paris being warmer than London, I don't believe a word of it. If M. Duclos wants a little Parisian dissipation, to Paris his master goes, no matter whether Katharine Fane is to be left alone in London or not."

"I shall not be gone a month, Kate, and you will have Dora's love affairs with the backwoodsman to settle in my absence."

Katharine coloured to her eyes; then bit her lip with vexation at the knowledge that she had done so. "You did not think me a great trouble for asking you to call on Steven Lawrence, did you? He has not a friend in London, and Mr. Whyte, and Bella, too, if the truth must be told, were so disagreeable to him the night he arrived, and—and I wrote my note to you on the impulse of the moment."

"Which, like all your impulses, was a right one, Katharine. Lawrence is a capital fellow—rough in the setting and ignorant, the worse for him! but very good company in his way, and as fine a natural taste in wines as I ever met with. I brought the fellow home to breakfast; did he tell you? and we got on excellently."

"You called on Steven Lawrence at once? You asked him to breakfast?" Miss Fane sat herself down on a low ottoman at her lover's side, and turned her face, beautifully radiant, up to his. "Lord Petres, how like you that was! But I knew you wouldn't mind, I

knew you would be good-natured, if I asked you, to a person in Mr. Lawrence's position."

"His position is a dangerous one, Kate. I've a great mind, only that it would rob you of an amusement, to take Steven Lawrence over to Paris with me. Paris, if he went to-morrow morning, might be his salvation. In another week it would be too late."

"Salvation! a dangerous position!" cried Katharine, opening those serene brown eyes of hers wide. "Good gracious! what is all this about? What particular peril does Mr. Lawrence run in London? He's old enough and big enough to look after himself, I'm sure."

"Did he bring you a bouquet this afternoon, Miss Fane?"

"He—he, or some one, left a bouquet, I believe, but Dot has it. It was for Miss Fane. Of course that meant Dora, not me."

"And where did you get the orange blossom you have in your hair? 'Tis beautifully dressed, Kate—would do credit to the best coiffeur in Europe. That natural crisp wave is what all the women in Paris have burnt their hair off their heads in trying to imitate."

"Orange blossom! I do wish you would try to remember the names of plants. How often I have tried to make you learn them! As if I should think of wearing orange blossom! I got my poor little bit of stephanotis out of Dot's bouquet. It was made up entirely of white flowers, and Dot likes everything with so much colour; so I took this bit of stephanotis from the centre, and cut her one of Bella's pink camellias to put there instead."

"Ah! And what (the stephanotis being disposed of) is going to be done between you and Dora with Steven himself? You know me too well, Kate, to think that I would interfere with anything that affords you innocent amusement; but—regarding me altogether as an indifferent spectator—I wish you would tell me what is going to be done with Steven? I never read fiction or attend theatres, as you know——"

"Except the Lyceum once," interrupted Katharine.

"But if I can just be told the beginning and witness the end, these little love dramas of real life divert me amazingly."

"I really don't know what you mean by 'love dramas' and 'becoming' of Steven," said Miss Fane, with a great air of unconcern. "I told you—did I not? about some letters there had been between him and Dot. The most likely thing for him to 'become' is her husband, I should suppose."

"Afterwards?"

"Why, be happy for ever, like the people in stories," cried Katharine, "of course. I consider that Dora would be a prize for any man. It will be a great piece of good fortune for your favourite, Lord Petres, if he marries her."

"My favourite or any other man who marries Dora Fane will require a good fortune," said Lord Petres, drily. "Kate, removed as you are so much above the prejudices of your sex in general, why do you retain this unholy hobby of seeking to promote the general unhappiness of the world through match-making? What good, what pleasure, will there be to yourself in forcing this unhappy young man into marrying your cousin Dora?"



"I force him, Lord Petres? What in the world do you mean? What influence can I have over Steven Lawrence or his decisions?"

"Every influence," was Lord Petres' placid answer. "Every influence, Katharine. How is it possible it should be otherwise? A man of a sanguine temperament like this backwoodsman is thrown, after living among wild beasts and savages for years, into the society of Katharine Fane, puts his heart—to speak, Kate, in the sentimental language that you like—at her feet, and then, Katharine Fane having been sufficiently amused by his torture, is to be kept quiet by a marriage with Miss Dora. Against the first part of the transaction I have nothing whatever to urge; but against the marriage, if only on behalf of suffering humanity generally, I protest. As soon as I saw what a good fellow Lawrence was, I determined to speak to you about it. Don't marry him to Dora?"

"If Mr. Lawrence wishes to marry my cousin, I shall certainly not bias her, either for or against him," said Katharine, wisely passing over the first portion of Lord Petres' remarks. "You talk of my hobby for match-making. If all your hobbies were carried into effect there would neither be love nor marriage, nor anything else that is good and unselfish in the world, you must remember!"

Miss Fane brought out the shot with spirit, and her eyes kindled.

"Whatever you or I think, will have small effect on the increase or decrease of marriage generally," said Lord Petres, with perfect equanimity. "It is a matter governed more by the price of bread, they say, than by any considerations of a sentimental or moral

character; so please don't be angry with me, Kate! Marry Steven Lawrence to Dora or to any one else, if it diverts you, but don't quarrel with me! I'm too weak to bear the effects of anger from you to-day." And Lord Petres lifted the beautiful white hand tenderly, then held it, as well as its superior size would allow, within his own.

Katharine's whole manner changed in a moment, her eyes softened, a little well-pleased smile came round the corner of her lips. Notwithstanding all his small selfishness, all his sybarite effeminate eccentricity, Miss Fane, in a certain way, (and putting love wholly out of the question), was very much more attached to Lord Petres than the world in general, or perhaps than she herself really believed. She belonged to that rare class of women who are able, frankly and without vanity, to make themselves the friends and companions of men even while the accidents of youth and beauty make men their slaves. All Lord Petres' quaint philosophies and systems amused her, all the sterling worth of his steadfast little character appealed to her just as heartily as if she had been a man instead of a girl of one and twenty. And then, it must be remembered, he never made love to her; never was jealous, never paid attention to any other woman,—never, when they happened to be seen together publicly, was anything but charming in his devotion to herself! What could she feel but gratitude to so perfectly generous a lover? What resolve could she have but to repay his absolute trust in her, however she might err in the letter, by the most absolute and loyal rectitude in the spirit?

"I have something very particular that I want to

tell you about, Lord Petres. You won't be angry with me—promise me you won't? when you hear how it happened; something about this Steven Lawrence, and no fault of mine, as you will see."

Whatever mischief poor Katharine's insatiate thirst for conquest had led her into since her engagement, she had always repeated the whole sum of her offending, without concealment or extenuation, to Lord Petres. There could be no very black guilt on her part, she would say to her conscience, so long as she was not ashamed to lay bare the state of her soul before him, her legitimate confessor; and as her conquests, and her repentances, on an average, could be reckoned at about two a week, the sound of *meâ culpâ* had already a somewhat familiar ring in Lord Petres' ears.

"I have wanted very much to tell you—please don't go to sleep! I shall be so unhappy if you don't forgive me—but Dot, as usual, made one of her ridiculous mistakes—sent my photograph to this young man—Lord Petres, if you look like that again I shall be silent—instead of her own. Now, could I help it?"

"You could not, Katharine."

"Didn't I do everything I could for them both? stopped away from the Atcherleys, where I was to have met *you*, to chaperon them—everything? Well, when he came—when this Mr. Lawrence came, Dot happened to have left the room, and so I . . . Lord Petres, I don't think it kind of you to laugh . . . I had to receive him alone. You understand?"

"Perfectly."

"And when he was shown in, of course I went for-

ward to meet him, and—how I do hate having to tell such ridiculous stories—he mistook me for Dot!”

Lord Petres was silent.

“Do you understand me, or are you asleep?” said Katharine, petulantly; “or do you want me to repeat the charming little anecdote again? I had to receive Mr. Lawrence, your favourite, alone, and—for I choose to tell you everything, sir, whether it is to my credit or not—and he,” dividing each word syllabically, “mis-took me for Dot.”

“Mis-took you for Dot,” repeated Lord Petres. “Then all I’ve got to say is, it must have been very disappointing for him when he found out his mistake.”

Miss Fane drew away her hand, and moved from Lord Petres’ side. After making a confession which costs one’s pride dear, there are few circumstances more humiliating than to find our confessor very much less moved by our guilt than we ourselves.

“I wonder whether you care for anything, Lord Petres! I wonder whether anything I did, or left undone, *could*, for one instant, cause you an emotion of any kind!”

“Certainly, hearing that you had been mistaken for your cousin Dora, would not,” answered Lord Petres. “Why will you insist upon wanting impossibilities, Katharine? Violent emotions—supposing me capable of them—would kill me. Every physician I ever consulted has ordered me to keep my feelings at a nice point of equilibrium, and fortunately, on the present occasion, they are divided with such geometrical accuracy that they precisely counterbalance each other. I’m sorry for Lawrence, because, as I told you just

now, I like the fellow, and I foresee grief in store for him, and I am glad for Miss Fane, because I foresee a new amusement in store for her—”

“Amusement—for me? I amused by Mr. Lawrence, after what I have told you?”

“Amused by torturing him first, and marrying him to Dot afterwards? certainly, Katharine. Don’t be angry again. You can’t help it, I know. The whole thing is a matter of course. Are spiders responsible for the imbecilities of the flies who choose to get entangled in their beautiful glistening webs? Men have the lower animals on which to gratify the instincts of their nature for destruction. Women, in obedience to the stupid customs of civilization, are forced to seek their quarry among their own species. If you had foxes to run down or pheasants to shoot, Katharine, you would not be as cruel to your kind as you are, depend upon it.”

“Cruel!” exclaimed Katharine, almost with tears in her eyes. “Well, I did not think such an accusation as that would ever have been brought against me. The feeling I have for Steven Lawrence is one of pure, simple kindness, and for Dot’s sake—yes, and for his own too, I mean, whatever you may think, Lord Petres—to do the poor fellow any good turn that lies in my power.”

“Oh, that is quite a different affair!” said Lord Petres, gravely; “I was unjust to you, Kate. You say you mean to do the poor fellow any good turn that lies in your power. I will tell you how to carry that intention out at once. Stay away from the theatre to-night, say ‘Not at home’ when he calls to-morrow, and for ever afterwards. The cure will be certain.

Lawrence is not a man to force himself where he has once met with a rebuff."

Katharine Fane hesitated. "I should hate even to *seem* to be unkind to a man placed as he is, Lord Petres. I can't help liking poor Steven Lawrence, in spite—in spite of his presumption; and his farm, as you know, is not two miles from the Dene. Would anything be more disagreeable than to meet him constantly in the country, as I must do, after behaving coldly to him now? Besides," she added, lightly, "all this you say about Mr. Lawrence's danger is really an affair of your own imagination. Do stout healthy men in real life break their hearts because they have been sentimental for three weeks over a wrong photograph? I wished to tell you the truth, of course, and now I shall never think of it at all again, except I mean as far as Dot is concerned, nor, I should say, would Steven Lawrence."

"Amuse yourself well, Katharine," said Lord Petres, taking out his watch and rising; "I am sorry to spend such a short time with you, but I have to see Bright before dinner about some new poison he wants me to take, and it is five and twenty minutes past six already. I shall write to you by the late post on Monday next, and if you have anything to say meanwhile write to me—the usual address. Now what am I especially to remember to do for you in Paris?"

"You are especially to remember to return soon," said Katharine; "also, if you can, to write to me oftener than once a fortnight while you are away."

"And what about dress? You know I never forget anything you commission me to do."

"Well, if you are sure it is not too much trouble,

I should like you to tell me about bonnets. Do the very best-dressed people wear the Reine Margot or the Dubarry shape? You know the difference between the two?"

"Perfectly." Lord Petres understood women's dress like a Frenchman. "I will go in the Bois the day but one after my arrival with no other object than to elucidate the point. Anything else?"

"I should like to know if the skirts are worn as long as ever, and also if they are *invariably* gored in thin materials. In silk and stuff there can be no question, of course, but—in spite of Descou—Bella and I feel the gravest doubts as regards ball-dresses."

"I will ask the best authorities in Europe, Katharine, and let you know. Are ball dresses or other thin materials *invariably* gored? Anything more?"

"Think of me a little, Lord Petres!"

"Quite a needless injunction, Miss Fane! Paris, with all the good that can be said for it, is the one city on earth where a beautiful Englishwoman runs least risk of being forgotten. I shall see no face like Katharine Fane's till I return."

This was how they parted; as they had parted any time during the last twelve months of their engagement. A well-acted reproach or two, a commission about the shape of bonnets and skirts from Katharine, a gracefully-turned compliment, a kiss on the white hand from Lord Petres. Was life to be taken up for ever in acting pretty little pictures of manners like these? thought Miss Fane, when she was alone; partings in which the lady droops her head and the gentleman kisses the tips of her fingers just as the figures do in a marionette comedy; mock confessions made

with a picturesque expression of repentance, to set a mock conscience at rest; later on, a prettier picture than all, with a soft-eyed marble-hearted bride in white silk and Honiton lace, a high-bred bored little bridegroom, for the principal figures, a train of attendant bridesmaids in the background, a Protestant dean, perhaps, and a Catholic bishop to bestow their several blessings on the happy pair; and then—then a wider scope of characters, with richer dresses and jewels to act them in, and Lord Petres, courteous, valetudinarian, indifferent; an excellent bachelor acquaintance for two hours out of the twenty-four, and as far from her, Katharine Fane, as the frigid pole from the broad equator, to be her fellow-actor for the remainder of her days? Was it possible that the fishermen's wives along the coast at home, with their few roods of sandy garden, their cottage full of sunburnt urchins, their simple human round of wifely cares, had a wholesomer, heartier hold on life than hers could ever be? Why, even Dot—

And then the door opened, and Dot, shining like a stage fairy, in bright pink silk, and with gold dust in her short hair, and Steven's flowers in her hand, walked in.

"I waited patiently till Lord Petres had departed, Kate. Bella met him as he was going out, and he tells her he is off to Paris to-morrow morning—not very lover-like, I think. Why, Katharine, there are tears in your eyes! Do you actually mean to say you care about bidding good-bye to Lord Petres for three weeks? or was it Mrs. Siddons or Rachel, who always used to shed real tears at the pathetic parts when she was acting?"

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## CHAPTER X.

## Two Hours in Paradise.

THE first scene of the *Figlia* was nearly over when Steven reached Covent Garden. As the box-keeper opened the door for him to enter, Katharine Fane, who was seated at the back part of the box, turned round and met him with a smile that set his heart at rest at once. He had been torturing himself, as he drove to the theatre, with all manner of doubts as to the reception Miss Fane would give him now that she had had time to think over his misconduct of last night.

"You are later than I told you to be, Mr. Lawrence"—this she said as Steven took the vacant chair at her side—"but Patti does not come on till the second scene, so you have not lost much. What a crowded house! is it not? To-night is the first time Patti has appeared since her illness, and there is to be a new ballet after the opera. Of course, you know who that is in the royal box? Bella"—and she leant forward and touched her sister's arm—"here is Mr. Lawrence."

Mrs. Dering turned, and bowed with just decent civility to Steven; Mr. Clarendon Whyte, who was at her side, lowered his eyelids about as much as he had done on their first introduction; Dora Fane stretched out her hand, and welcomed him with a whole roulade of little nods and smiles. "So good of you, Mr. Lawrence! such beautiful flowers!" holding up his bouquet to her lips. "How can I thank you enough for remembering me?"

"I—I must thank you for accepting them, Miss Fane!" said poor Steven. Had Dot been eighty,

Steven's tender reverence for everything bearing a woman's shape would have kept him from telling her that he had never remembered her at all. "I was only afraid I took a liberty in sending them." And then he drew back, and with a feeling of perfectly childish disappointment glanced at the bouquet in Katharine Fane's hand—the accustomed bouquet of rare hot-house flowers that Lord Petres' florist had orders to send to Hertford Street every evening during the season.

"I was a little bit jealous about Dot's bouquet, I must confess," she cried, with her ready knack of answering looks rather than words. "These are very beautiful in their way, but I'm so passionately fond of all white flowers—stephanotis, most of all. I stole a piece, as you see," bending her neck so that he could better see the flower in her hair, "and made Dot replace it as she could. You must not be angry with me, you know."

"Angry!" said Steven, under his breath. Not another word; yet, when he had spoken, Katharine Fane felt that they had made a sudden, an enormous leap into intimacy; and steadily, though her cheek kept its colour, her pulse quickened.

"Here is Patti," she whispered, leaning forward to catch a first glimpse of the little figure that was tripping across the stage to Sulpizio's side, "and we must not speak another word. Now mind, Mr. Lawrence, I expect you to be in raptures. Ah, how pretty she is looking—you dear little creature! look at her through the glasses, and tell me if you ever saw such a beautiful face in your life."

Steven, as you may imagine, was supremely ignorant of the nature of opera-glasses, and, after one or two in-

effectual attempts at using them, declared, boldly, that he saw better with his own eyes. "Impossible!" said Katharine, "they are the best glasses I ever used. You cannot have the focus right. Let me set them for you—so. Now, isn't she beautiful? Such eyes, and such a mouth, and such goodness on all the dear little face!"

"She is handsome!" said Steven, as he returned the glasses to Miss Fane's hand, but without the slightest enthusiasm in his tone.

"Handsome! did you ever see any face more perfectly beautiful?"

"Yes, indeed I have, Miss Fane."

After which they were silent again; Katharine leaning back in her chair, and listening, with seemingly rapt attention to the music, and Steven drinking in by every sense the subtle delicious intoxication of her presence: the intoxication to which this fairy scene of light and brilliancy—the stage, the audience, the prima-donna's voice itself—were to him but adjuncts!

Neither then, nor afterwards, was Steven Lawrence anything but a very prosaic Kentish yeoman, as far as expression went: neither through words, marble or colour, was thought or emotion of his destined, while he lived, to find artistic utterance. Yet, for this one evening, I say that a mysteriously-quickenened soul passed into the commonplace "sheath of a man," and made him feel, for two hours or so, like a poet and an artist! He followed the story of the opera with Katharine's help, and—simply carried away by stage virtues and stage passions, like a child—his heart fired at the image of Maria's love for Tonio; at her agony of grief when she parts from her humble soldier life, her outburst of honest nature when in the midst of her new-

gotten wealth and station, she sees Sulpizio, and the dear old *rataplan! rataplà!* burst, involuntarily as a bird's song, from her lips. Seven or eight months later, Steven happened to hear the *Figlia del Reggimento*, Mademoiselle Patti singing in it again, in Paris, and was just as alive as any other enlightened man would be to the stage tinsel of investing a camp-girl with all this love and faith and generosity of heart. To-night he was a child, a poet, a lover—a believer in everything fair and noble in human nature: even human nature on the boards of Covent Garden Theatre.

"You are as enthusiastic as I meant you to be," said Katharine, during one of the choruses of the second act. "At first, you would scarcely allow that Patti was good looking, and now you know you are utterly carried away—ready to throw yourself at her feet!"

"I know that I am carried away," answered Steven, in his candid fashion; "carried away much farther than my wisdom bids me go, but I know also that I have no wish to throw myself at the feet of any woman living, save one, and she is not Mademoiselle Patti."

Now, from a man whom she regarded as an equal, Katharine Fane would have held this speech to be either a stupid impertinence or a still more stupid declaration; and, for very certain, would have met it with an answer admirably blent of mockery, indifference, and disdain. But after the charge Lord Petres had brought against her of cruelty she felt it was impossible for her to treat any presumption, any folly of this poor Steven's with undue severity, so did what was, in truth, more fatally cruel than the harshest rebuff she could have dealt him: blushed ever so little, and threw down her eyes, and then laughed—that gracious low laugh,

that to Steven's mind was such far sweeter music than any in Donizetti's score.

"You are very faithful to your absent love, Mr. Lawrence; that is all I can say. There are few men who would not be led away from their allegiance, for an hour, at all events, by such a siren as Patti. Ah! when you have lived among us longer," and she sighed, "you will forget all these primitive virtues you have learnt beyond the seas. To be faithful to any one thing or person long, would be poor policy to us men or women of the world!" And she broke off one of the costliest flowers in her bouquet, and scattered it absently, petal by petal, on her dress as she spoke.

Her face, her attitude, her whole expression at this moment, was a picture destined never while he lived to fade from Steven's memory. He saw her at a hundred future times, when she looked every whit as fair as now—times when he loved her more passionately, perhaps—times when he hated, when he despised her; but never again did any image of her so sink in upon his heart as on this evening, when, as I have said, he felt for once in his life with an artist's feeling, and saw with an artist's eyes. The pure-cut blue-veined arm, showing bare from cloak or drapery against the crimson hangings of the box; the throat, white as fresh-hewn marble, but instinct with warm life; the delicate line of profile; the parted lips; the careless hair;—every smallest detail in that bright picture, it was his misery (and his exceeding happiness) to retain within his memory, living, intact, as in this first moment when his senses—unconscious of all that they were storing for the future—received their register.

"Quite delightful to see your cousin looking so

well pleased," whispered Mr. Clarendon Whyte, with ironical emphasis, into Dot's ear. "Of course I don't presume to understand Miss Fane's fastidious tastes, still I should not have thought that that—er—pwize-fighter sort of man would have been likely to find favour in her sight."

"Pwize-fighter sort of man?" repeated Dot. Poor little Dot! she was in an excessively bad temper with Mr. Whyte, or she would never have ventured to mimic his peculiar charm of pronunciation. "I may be stupid, but I do not in the least see the point. Mr. Lawrence is one of the handsomest men I ever saw—so sunburnt and manly-looking, and excellent features as well. Mr. Lawrence, I hope you are not *very* much bored by all this music we are making you listen to?"

And Dot turned pointedly away from Mr. Clarendon Whyte, and, until Patti's entrance silenced the house again, continued to give Steven the prettiest smiles, the most coquettish glances and whispers, of which she was capable.

Dot exercising all her little Parisian charms upon the poor backwoodsman, and Katharine Fane friendly and gracious at his side! Had Steven been anything but the plain single-hearted fellow that he was, some degree of vanity could scarcely have failed to be called forth in him by such a position; and vanity once set in action would, no doubt, have gone far to save him. But unhappily for himself, the passion, the madness that already filled Steven Lawrence's breast, was too thoroughly genuine to admit of any smaller feeling having place there. A man whose ambition is seriously set on grasping a crown, is not likely to be turned

aside by any paltry or personal temptations that beset him on the road.

When the sorrows of the charming little Figlia were just attaining the climax which dramatic art requires the sorrows of all heroines to attain ten minutes before the curtain falls upon their final happiness—Steven at the summit of his Fools' Paradise—the door of the box opened, and a man's figure glided quietly into the chair, still unoccupied behind Katharine.

"Captain Gordon!" she whispered, turning round to the new comer with a smile that made Steven's heart sink to zero. "Captain Gordon, exactly in time, of course, to be too late! Why have you not been to see me all this age? What has become of you? Have you been out of town, or only lazy, as usual; and did you know that I was to be here to-night?"

"I have been out of town, Miss Fane, and lazy also as usual; and I knew that you were to be here to-night. Is it likely I should have come unless I had known it? Petres has persuaded me to go to Paris with him to-morrow, and told me where you were to be found, so I just came in for two or three minutes to wish you good-bye.

Captain Gordon was a man somewhat under forty years of age, with a slow, melancholy way of speaking, a manner indolent almost to effeminacy; blonde hair and beard already thickly sprinkled with white, and a face that, without being handsome, had something beautiful in the excessive serenity and goodness of its expression. "*Une véritable tête de Jésus*," poor Gavarni said of George Gordon when he saw him once from the window of his sick-room in Paris.

"Just the sort of man to please these women of the world," thought Steven, taking a thoroughly unfavourable and thoroughly unjust measurement of him in one cold look. "A smooth-tongued, fair-skinned old dandy, with the pretty manners of a girl, and all the graces his London tailor can put upon him. What chance should a rough-handed, sun-burnt savage like me have among them all?"

And he turned away, trying his utmost to look interested in the fate of the lovers on the stage, and indifferent to everything else; but hearing with preternatural accuracy every word of the friendly farewells, and little commissions for Paris, and commands to be back very soon, and bring Lord Petres back too, that it was Miss Fane's pleasure to whisper into the "old dandy's" ear during the five or six minutes that he remained in the box.

Had Steven known a little better what manner of man that old dandy was, I think, even with all his newly-awakened faculties for self-torture, he would have found it hard to be jealous of Katharine Fane's friendship for him. Katharine, who had never a word to say to carpet-knights of the order of Mr. Clarendon Whyte, was weak exceedingly in her devotion to all genuine hardihood or personal bravery in men. Her veneration for the highest intellect in Europe was second—could you have got her to confess the absolute truth—to what she felt for Garibaldi or for Stonewall Jackson; and, of all the men she had ever personally known, George Gordon seemed in her eyes the bravest. "Other men go into battles," she would say, "because secondary motives call them there. It is their pro-



fession only, or their duty." (This is Katharine's morality, not mine.) "George Gordon seeks danger because he likes danger. No man would go about on battle-fields as he does, helping the wounded on both sides, with only a silk umbrella over his head, unless he had a lion's heart—and I love him for it!" And George Gordon, quite aware of the state of her affections, had long ago, in Lord Petres' presence, pledged himself seriously to return them in the event of his friend's death before his own.

His love of running about on battle-fields had more than once cost the "old dandy" dear. At Solferino, the weather being hot, he managed to hire a calèche, in which he leisurely drove himself about just outside the French lines, and falling into the hands of the Austrians was on the point of being shot as a spy, when an officer who had known him in Vienna declared him to be English, and a lunatic, and so saved his life. In the Danish war, he and a friend of the same tastes, went regularly through the campaign; and at Dybbøl, while indifferently succouring wounded Danes and Prussians alike, George Gordon got hit by a spent ball in the leg and lamed for life. During the four visits that he paid to America during the war, his hair-breadth escapes by land and sea would have made a much thicker volume than that of many professional heroes, could he have been induced to write them. It was impossible for any one who really knew the man to accuse George Gordon of affectation or self-glory in his amateur pursuit of danger. Except to the three or four men with whom he was on terms of intimacy, he never spoke of what he had been doing at all; his own brother first knew of his being in the thick of the

Danish fighting through seeing his conduct at Dybbøl mentioned in the correspondent's letter of the *Times*. When he was a youngster, his father, an Ayrshire country gentleman, bought him a commission in the Guards; and by five-and-twenty George Gordon had drunk to the dregs of the cup of ordinary London ball-room dissipation, and grown sick of it. So he exchanged into a line regiment, then starting for the Crimea; fought steadily through the whole of the Russian war, and at the conclusion of the peace (forced upon us by the French, he always said), sent in his papers in disgust, and left the service. From that time till the present, his life had been spent in dawdling about the West End during the season—yachting or shooting a little in autumn—and, as Katharine said, “helping the wounded on battle-fields, with a silk umbrella over his head,” whenever any fighting happened to be going on about the world. Ball-going young ladies called him cynical, because he was indifferent to balls and to their society; but ball-going young ladies, for once, were faulty in their deductions. See George Gordon with children—see the abject slavery to which any human being from the age of two to ten could at once reduce him—and say whether it was possible such a man could be a cynic! He belonged simply, as far as social ethics went, to the broad school of middle-aged Bond Street philosophers (I fear not a decreasing school), who, in their gilded youth, have learnt to regard young ladies as a species of animated doll—expensive in its tastes, unprofitable as a companion—and who, after five or six and thirty, think scarcely more about them than men of twenty think of tops and marbles.

With Katharine Fane alone, out of all the young women of his acquaintance—Katharine, who, through some strange inconsistency of nature, was full of soft feminine grace, yet not frivolous; beautiful, yet alive to a great many interests in human life besides her beauty and her dress—would George Gordon, of his own free will, spend more than a quarter of an hour at a time: and with her he was the most charming, the most constant of friends. People of the world, with the world's accustomed gross disbelief in such friendships, had for a long time insisted that Captain Gordon must be one of Miss Fane's rejected suitors, but that the girl was too subtle—think of Lord Petres' wretched health, and his acknowledged distaste for marriage, and George Gordon an elder son!—to let him go. But as George Gordon was a man who, for very many years, had cared nothing for what was said of him, and as Lord Petres not only continued to live, but to show every sign of fidelity to Miss Fane, the intimacy had just gone on until the world had ceased even to fear that no good would come of it.

To say that Katharine Fane was not secretly flattered by the chivalrous devotion George Gordon gave to her, and to her only; to say that no little feminine intentional art of hers ever reminded him that he was only a man—left unscathed on sufferance—and she a young and beautiful woman, who might be victor if she chose, would be to say that Katharine was not Katharine. In her friendships, honest and large-hearted though she was, Katharine Fane could no more help wishing to be a little more than liked than the great queen could help wishing her courtiers to bow to the soft hand of Elizabeth Tudor the woman, rather than

to the wisdom and majesty of Elizabeth the Princess. What wonder that Steven, too ignorant to discriminate between the finer shades of friendship, flirtation, and love-making, should feel his heart grow sick as he watched them together? Those pleasant laughs, those low whispers, those full soft glances; every trick of manner that in his folly he had considered as something belonging to himself alone; were accorded just as freely, he saw, to this man with the faded dandy face as they had been to him; as freely as they would be accorded to Lord Petres; to the next man she spoke to; to everybody weak enough to be led astray by them. And five minutes ago he had been ready to tell her that he worshipped her; to throw himself on her pity! *Her* pity! The tender mercy of a woman of the world like this!

As Captain Gordon left the box, and while Steven was getting all the wisdom he could out of his own reflections, and remembering Klaus's story and Lord Petres' warning, and everything else most disagreeable to remember, the curtain slowly fell on the Figlia, and Tonio, and the old sergeant, and the grand Marchesa, all holding each other's hands, and stepping backwards, and bowing and smiling, as happy newly-reconciled relations do—on the stage. And with grim satisfaction Steven realised to himself what a ridiculous gew-gaw piece of trumpery an opera was. These gesticulating foreign men and women singing out their loves and sorrows to the other men and women—actors equally with themselves—who sat round in their boxes and listened. The curtain down, the prima-donna was recalled; twice—three times; and then began one of the usual Patti scenes. Men in the stalls clapping as

if they were frenzied; women standing up in the boxes and throwing their bouquets on the stage, on the orchestra—anywhere; Mrs. Dering, and the Miss Fanes, even Mr. Clarendon Whyte, sharing in the general excitement.

“Applaud, Mr. Lawrence, applaud!” cried Katharine. “How can you be so cold? The first time she has appeared since her illness—and look! ah, do look how the princes are clapping!”

But Steven was not in a humour to clap his hands together because he was bid; and even the example of princes failed to arouse him into enthusiasm.

## CHAPTER XI.

### Transformation Scenes.

“JEALOUS!” thought Katharine, glancing round, when the house had grown quiet again, at Steven’s moody face—“jealous, and not a perfect temper—ah! you poor, big Steven, what a life is before you! How good it would be for once to see Lord Petres look like that! Can a man care much for one, I wonder, without being made miserable sometimes? Could Lord Petres be made miserable by anything except east wind and the doctors? Mr. Lawrence,” very softly.

No answer.

“Mr. Lawrence?” rather louder.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Fane.”

“How did you enjoy that last scene of the opera?”

“Excessively, of course.”

“You did not,” thought Katharine, “and you shall tell me so before long. Ah, you are a convert at last,

then. You confess that the little Figlia is perfectly charming?"

"She is a perfectly good actress," answered Steven, more morosely than any man had ever answered Katharine Fane before, "on or off the stage, *that* I am told, is the great secret of all women's charms."

"Mr. Lawrence, please don't be cynical," said Katharine, with thorough good-humour. "If you knew how pleasant it would be to me to meet with some one who would always give his own fresh opinions, not the worn-out opinions of the rest of this worn-out world!"

"You would not like such an one long, I guess," said Steven, bluntly. "No man who spoke the whole truth would be fit company for—for——"

"An artificial, silly fine lady like me," interrupted Katharine. "Very well, then, I have only one thing to ask of you—try. As long as we know each other—and I hope that will be a very long time—speak the truth to me, and see if I ever dislike it. Now, will you?"

"Is the compact to be a mutual one?" asked Steven, wondering as he spoke at his own audacity.

"Mutual! yes, to be sure, if it is in my power to make it so?" cried Katharine, with hearty readiness; "though it will be a more difficult part for me to play than for you, I suspect, Mr. Lawrence. However, I will do my best, and probably, like most other things, the habit of truth-telling can be acquired by practice. Now, do you, speaking under our new compact, think that the chief secret of a woman's charm is that she shall be unreal—a thorough actress, as you said just now?"

"I only repeated what I have been told, Miss Fane," said Steven. "I speak on the authority of a person much better informed in such matters than myself."

"Ah, I understand. Lord Petres has been inoculating you with some of his horrible French heresies. Give me your own opinion, please. I know those of Lord Petres—on all subjects—by heart."

"Miss Fane, the subject is above me altogether. I am a barbarian—in the darkest ignorance respecting everything, except perhaps bears and panthers."

"But you did thoroughly enjoy that bit of Patti's acting in the last scene?"

Steven was silent.

"Why won't you tell me, Mr. Lawrence? I really wish to hear your first frank impressions of everything."

"Well then, as you force me to speak," and Steven looked at her steadily, "I don't believe I heard a note of the music in that last scene at all—my enjoyment in it, and in everything else, was spoilt. Don't you know this just as well as I can tell it you?"

With a man as uncompromisingly sincere as Steven, the most refined coquette, the most finished woman of the world, would have found it hard to hold her ground with plain truth-telling once admitted between them. Katharine's eyes sank. "I was so sorry to find Captain Gordon was going out of town. I should have liked to introduce him to you. I am sure you would get on well together."

"I think not, Miss Fane, if Captain Gordon is the gentleman to whom you were talking just now. These fine London dandies are not at all in my way."

"Dandies! Oh, I like that! George Gordon is about as much a dandy as Lord Petres, and I hear that you and he have already become fast friends."

"Lord Petres was very kind to me to-day," said Steven, quickly. "I am not so ignorant as to think that a man of Lord Petres' rank and fortune could ever be my friend."

All the native generosity of Katharine's heart—the one quality unspoiled in her by worldly contact—was stirred by his tone. "Difference in rank! What, have you really come back from America with the old-fashioned idea that English people do nothing, at this age of the world, but bow down before the golden calf of birth or station? Why, Lord Petres himself says that the hours of aristocratic principle are numbered. In another twenty years, if we go on as we are doing now, the only possible aristocracy will be that of labour. The rulers of the world will be its workmen."

"That is very well for Lord Petres, in his position, to say," answered Steven, quietly, "and very gracious of you, in your position, to repeat. But we live now, not twenty years hence, and I, for one, have not the slightest wish to alter facts as they stand. Lord Petres is a rich man and a gentleman; I am a small farmer, whose bread must be earned by the work of my own right hand. Lord Petres may patronize me. He could never make me his friend, nor should I wish it."

Until now every feeling of Katharine Fane's for Steven had been largely mixed with pity. She pitied him for his honesty; for the mistake that had brought him among them at all; for his prospect of becoming Dot's husband. More than all she pitied while she liked him better for his Quixotic hopeless adoration for



herself. In this moment she first distinctly recognised that her new plaything was a man; and her heart went out to him.

"You are proud, Mr. Lawrence, and I like you better for being so. Some day, when you have got really to know us all, I think you will reckon Lord Petres and George Gordon—me, too, I hope—among your friends. George Gordon is one of my firmest allies. He is not, any more than Lord Petres, what is called a ladies' man, generally; but I am afraid I don't get on with ladies' men. All my greatest friends, until now, have been men of the age of Lord Petres—old men Dot and Bella call them—who have given up balls and young ladies' society a quarter of a century ago. Fine London dandies"—and she gave a glance at Mr. Clarendon Whyte—"are no more in my way than in yours. However we differ in some things, there at least is a bond of sympathy between us from the commencement."

So she charmed his jealousy away: so, in spite of himself, she made him feel that he was to be regarded as one of her friends—a friend on a like footing, on a like equality, with the rest.

"We shall return home very soon now," she went on, as Steven remained silent; "to-morrow, if I can possibly induce Dot to go—I have had enough of London for this season—and then I hope you will get to know us better. We shall expect to see a great deal of you at the Dene."

"And you advise me to come there?" said Steven. "Remember that you have promised to tell me the plain truth in everything? You are good enough to call

yourself my friend, and you advise me to come often to your house?"

"I do, indeed, Mr. Lawrence. I know that papa and my mother will be glad to see you, and Dora, too, of course, and—"

The curtain rose upon the first scene of the after-piece; and Katharine—it was balm hereafter to her conscience to remember—left the sentence unfinished.

"Oh! isn't that lovely?" cried Dot, jumping up, or, rather, down, upon her feet. A sensational tableau, in which stage dresses were to be seen at their best upon the ladies of the ballet, and under the glare of electric light, was the only portion of dramatic art that appealed with real force to Dot's sympathies. "Do you see Mademoiselle Fleuri, Kate? How well she looks in light hair! Mr. Whyte, is little Fleuri's hair her own, dyed, or false? I always wish so I could see these people close, to know how they make up!"

"Mademoiselle Fleuri's hair is as much her own as anything purchased at an extravagantly high price can be," said Mr. Whyte, with a feeble smile at his own reproduction of this oldest of all poor jokes. "It's the dearest colour in the world—only one shop in Paris supplies it—real blonde cendrée. I can ascertain for you the exact price of the whole coiffure, if you like."

"Price! Why, do you think I want to imitate persons of that kind?" cried Dot, indignantly. "I should have thought wearing my hair four inches long, as I do, would prevent people, at least, from suspecting me of anything false—which I detest. Oh, Katharine! look at the mauve and silver group!—made long, I declare, those would be exquisite ball-dresses—and the court ladies, and the pages! I could think myself

in Paris again. This is the best thing I ever saw before in England."

The afterpiece was one of those mixed representations, half ballet, half *féerie*, wholly "sensation," which London managers have of late begun so liberally to import from Paris: a representation making no particular attempt at the imitation of nature, striving little after grace, nothing whatever after the awakening of any save "sensational" emotion in the minds of the spectators: an affair altogether of lime-lights and transformations, and scores of well-favoured young women lightly clad in tissue dresses, but which held a refined and educated audience in rapt attention from the moment the curtain rose until it fell. Miss Fane and Mrs. Dering were quite as genuine in their admiration of it all as Dot. "Is it not wonderfully got up?" said Katharine, turning to Steven, as Mademoiselle Fleuri, after a succession of "daring flights" and breathless pirouettes, was receiving the enthusiastic applause of the stalls and a shower of bouquets more liberal even than had been accorded to Patti. "Is not little Fleuri's dancing good, and the effect of the whole scene admirable?"

"I don't know whether the dancing is called 'good,'" answered Steven. "I believe I have seen the gipsy dancers throw their feet as high in the streets of Mexico. Of the general effect of the scene, I think I had better give no opinion."

"Yes, please do; I should like to hear how these theatrical effects strike people who are unused to them."

"Well, then, Miss Fane, I should say the effect—for what it aims at!—is perfect; but I am pained to

see *you* here. It is not, to my mind, a fitting or a decorous scene for a woman to witness."

A blush of angry surprise coloured Katharine's face to the temples. "So much for giving wild Indians the liberty to express their savage instincts!" she thought. "I don't know what you mean, Mr. Lawrence, by 'not a fitting scene.' Would I, would my sister, would any of us be here, if it was not perfectly befitting? You forget yourself a little, I think."

"I remember I was ordered to speak the truth," said Steven, humbly, "and I see that I have offended you. But what is said is said. I spoke only what I meant."

Miss Fane looked away from him without answering a syllable—looked away with an expression of cold dignity which, three minutes ago, Steven would have sworn that soft face was incapable of wearing; and so the ballet went on. More "daring flights," more fairies dressed in rose-bud wreaths and silver wings, more electric light, more golden showers. Steven sat it all out in silent misery. That he had, by his gross plain speaking, irrevocably offended Miss Fane, was certain; yet for his life he could not have brought himself to soften away, or apologise for that which he had said. Brought up as a boy in austere dissenting horror of theatres, cards, and dancing, Steven, when he found himself his own master at eighteen, had, as a matter of course, become a frequenter of every theatre and gambling-house which the Californian towns offered to him. His temperament (the old temperament of the Lawrences, *pur sang*) was essentially, and in spite of all hereditary or acquired beliefs, a pleasure-loving one; his capacity for resisting temptation of all kinds

small; his eagerness for present enjoyment far stronger than his dread of future retribution. And still, no uncommon anomaly in characters like his, the prejudices of his early years had remained unshaken long after principle, as applied to his own life, had succumbed. The old puritanical view of theatres being the outworks of the Evil One had never been stronger in his heart than at this moment. Mademoiselle Fleuri, and the attendant crowd of nymphs and fairies and pages, belonged he thought, to precisely the same class as the gipsy dancers of the Mexican streets; and for eyes as honest as Katharine's to look calmly on at their evolutions was sacrilege! He was too uneducated to know that refined people regard a ballet altogether from an æsthetic point of view; too narrow-minded to remember that what was of the earth to him might, to more highly-cultivated eyes and consciences, be pure. He felt only—as one may imagine a solitary Mahomedan would feel on finding himself among European ladies in a ball-room—that he was assisting at a scene of gross unveiled indecorum, yet one in which he alone out of all the assembled company saw or imagined any evil.

Suddenly, just as the ballet was closing in a flood of rose-coloured light, Katharine turned to him again. "Mr. Lawrence," she said sweetly, "forgive me for speaking as I did! I have been trying during the last quarter of an hour to see things as you—fresh from the bears and panthers—must see them, and at last I have brought myself to feel how natural it was that you should speak as you did. Now, I like a good ballet, and I don't, and never shall see the slightest harm in it; but then I don't know that I ever see harm

in anything. You do. These little differences of opinion will give us the more to talk about. Will you put on my cloak for me?"

She rose, and Steven took a voluminous soft fabric of white cashmere, silk, and swansdown from the back of her chair, and began to turn it round and round—whichever side he turned it finding that it grew more hopelessly unlike a cloak in his grasp. Katharine was accustomed to the attentions of men who knew as much about cashmere and swansdown as she did herself, and something in the yeoman's ignorance pleased her—I suppose by force of contrast.

"Let me help you out of all that labyrinth!" she whispered, looking up with a smile into his embarrassed face, as she took the cloak from him. "These tassels, you see, are supposed to represent a hood, made so that it cannot by possibility be drawn over any human head; now, if you would try *once* more?"

And then Steven, with reverential hands, having put the cloak round her shoulders, she took his arm, in spite of a look from Mrs. Dering, and led the way out of the box.

The lobbies of the theatre were densely crowded that night. Dukes, earls, and commoners—half London—had followed in the wake of royalty to see Mademoiselle Fleuri in the new ballet; and before a minute had passed, Steven and Katharine found themselves cut off from the rest of the party.

"I see some one has picked up Dora," said Katharine, looking back across her shoulder, "and Bella is with Mr. Whyte, so we are all right. I never feel easy about Dora in a crowd, until a pretty strong arm protects her; the poor little Dot might so easily be

knocked down and trodden to pieces. Please forgive me, Mr. Lawrence!" This as a great wave of people from the upper staircase made her cling closer to Steven's arm. "I wonder whether you will ever forget the *peine forte et dure* you have been put through this evening?"

"I shall remember none of the foreign languages they sang in," answered Steven, upon whom, as you have seen, French quotations were lost. "I shall remember being with you, and your toleration of my stupidity always. To-night has been to me like the beginning of a new life, Miss Fane."

A good many of Katharine's friends came across her on her way out, and all of them—I speak of her female friends—looked, with more attention than London people usually bestow on unknown men, at Steven's handsome face, towering a good head and shoulders above the common crowd. It had not hitherto been Katharine's fate to be brought into contact with men of whose natural or physical endowments she could feel proud. Her father, whom she could just remember, was small and delicate; her step-father, Mr. Hilliard, measured about five feet five in his shooting boots; Lord Petres was half a head shorter than herself; and it was with a feeling of weakness, of dependence, absolutely new to her experience that she clung to Steven's stout arm, and let him pilot and support her through the crowd. The existence of those qualities by which Steven Lawrence had been known among his rough mates in the American woods, his hardihood, his strength, his nerve, seemed revealed to the girl, as if by instinct, in this moment, when the only difficulties the poor fellow had to overcome were the clinging laces and training draperies of an avalanche of fine adies! and all the

men whom she had known hitherto were dwarfed, as she mentally placed them at Steven's side.

"Dot will have a strong arm to uphold her," she thought; "yes, and a warm heart to love her, when . . . . when all this present folly is past, and I am forgotten!" and she sighed.

Steven turned, and saw that she was looking tired and pale. "Miss Fane, you are ill," he whispered tenderly; "let me make a road for you; I can, in an instant, if you wish it, and get you into the air? you look faint."

But Katharine laughed, and declared herself strong enough to bear another hour, if there was need, of her position. "If you knew what we have to go through in London parties," she said, "you would not accuse me of fainting in a crowd like this. I have stood more cruelly trampled upon and crushed than we are now, on a staircase for two hours together at an 'at home,' and called it pleasure afterwards. Ah, my stephanotis!" they had reached the outer vestibule, and were within a yard or two of their own party again, "my poor little bit of stephanotis is falling, and I can't even raise a hand to save it!"

And as she spoke her flower, the only one out of Steven's bouquet that had reached her, fell, to be trodden, of course, into atoms by the crowd.

"The best place for it!" said Steven, with a sudden, bitter recollection of all Lord Petres had said to him,—"the best place for it;" but there was a kind of question in his voice. "The gift reminds the giver of his place!"

Katharine Fane was silent.

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## CHAPTER XII.

Dot's Beau-Ideal.

"I THINK if you do marry him that you will be very fortunate, Dot. I think any woman would be fortunate who married Steven Lawrence. Whatever his short-comings in birth or fortune, or outward polish, he is a man. You would never have to blush for him!"

"C'est selon," answered Dot, sharply. "In his place, among ploughed fields and turnips, I am quite ready to allow Steven Lawrence may have his merits. In a drawing-room I should blush for him every ten minutes; if, that is to say, which is very unlikely, I ever became Mr. Steven Lawrence's wife."

The rouge and the gold-dust were gone; the baby-curls pinned tightly back from the temples; the pink silk was replaced by a plain cambric wrapper; and the little shining fairy of the opera had turned into a very old fairy indeed, as she stood before the fire in Katharine's room, talking into the small hours, as her custom was, over the events of the day. Katharine looked at her with a profound feeling of pity as she spoke. To a girl in the flush of her youth and beauty no sight is more pathetic than that of an unmarried woman eight or ten years older than herself—eight or ten years, all the fair summer that lies so full of promise before *her*, wasted! and the great prize, the prize which is to make up for lost youth and beauty, for vanished conquests, and slaves that are slaves no longer, unattained.

"If you despise Steven Lawrence and his suit now,

you may repent it some day, Dora. Balls and operas, and gentlemen like Mr. Clarendon Whyte, are very well for a certain time, but——”

“But Dora Fane is within a few months of thirty,” interrupted Dora, bitterly, “and having missed all better chances in her youth, must marry the first decent man who offers to her, or be a poor dependant for life. You need not be afraid of *that*, Katharine! I would fifty times sooner go on the stage, when you marry, than have to live upon my relations any longer; indeed, I am not sure I wouldn’t sooner do it than marry a man like Steven Lawrence. The disgrace to Bella would be greater,” cried Dot, with a flash of the eyes, “and I should be more amused myself. I like the stage, and everything belonging to it, and I loathe the country, and everything belonging to *it*—yeomen especially.”

And genuine tears came into Dora Fane’s eyes as she stood and stared disconsolately at the fire. “Me in a farm-house!” she broke out, as Katharine kept silent. “Me going to a disgusting meeting-house! Me, with my delicate chest, on that bleak Kent coast from one year’s end to the other. I wish I was dead. I wish I had been left among the people who suited me in Paris. What do I care for the good name of all the Fanes or Hilliards who ever lived? What benefit will my old family ever be to me, I should like to know?”

“None at all, my dear Dora,” answered Katharine, kindly. “The happiness of your own future life is all I care about, and I do think you would be happier married, and living quietly in a home of your own now—yes, even if that home was a Kentish farm. The

meeting-house you need not go to, unless you choose, and I don't see how Ashcot can be much bleaker than the Dene, where you have lived in very tolerable health for the last fifteen years of your life."

"And I," said Dot, "think that you are altogether mistaken. I am not one of those women whose ideas of happiness are marriage, marriage, and again marriage! If I marry a man I don't like, I shall be miserable, and make him miserable too. Marriage without love—although you do call me half French—is a crime in my eyes," said Dot, loftily.

"I am glad to hear you speak so, Dot," was Katharine's answer. "When you wrote to Mr. Lawrence, when I received him here on his arrival, I certainly thought you were prepared to like him. You do not, it seems. The matter is at an end."

"I wish you wouldn't take me up so, Katharine. I'm not clever like you, and I can't argue, and I'm sure, Kate, you are the last person who ought to be hard on any one for being changeable! I don't at all wish to give up poor Steven Lawrence, if I was sure of his intentions, and I can't help liking people who are unworthy, and—and I have been very badly treated!" cried Dot, dissolving in earnest now. "You may talk of Frenchwomen as you like. I don't think any Frenchwoman could flirt more than Arabella does. If she calls it high-principled, I do not! Why doesn't she look after her children? Why doesn't she let the poor dear old General have a home by his own fire-side? Tell me that, Katharine!"

"The poor old General prefers his club, as you know very well, Dot, and Bella, far from neglecting her children, is devoted to them. I think her an ad-

mirable wife," said Katharine, warmly. "There are few women as handsome, and as much sought after as Bella, of whom the world speaks so well. As to flirtation, I hate ever to hear the word applied to a married woman at all!"

"You may hate the word, but Bella does not hate the thing," cried Dot, firing more and more. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, Kate, but I will say, that if there is one quality I *despise* more than another in a woman, it is hypocrisy; and Bella has behaved with cruel—yes, cruel—hypocrisy as regards Clarendon Whyte. When he first used to come to this house did he, or did he not, like me best, Katharine? I ask you frankly."

"I should say Clarendon Whyte never liked anything living except himself," answered Katharine. "His heart seems to me to be just as empty as his head. You are not——" and she laid her hand kindly on her cousin's, "Dora, it is not possible that you care really for such a man?"

"It matters little whether I do or not," said Dot. "To-night—well, Kate, you never betray anything, and I don't mind telling you the truth—to-night I *did* believe that he was going to speak. Something he said last night gave me the right to think so; and of course, if he had, there would have been nothing of dishonour, as things stand now between me and Mr. Lawrence, in my accepting him. I've been very uncertain of late, and I tried to keep—I mean I did not want to give absolute discouragement to anybody. You understand?"

Katharine nodded shortly.

"And now, to-night, you saw Bella's conduct; talk-

ing to him the whole evening; turning his brain," Katharine's eyes looked an interjection, "as she can, in her quiet manner, when she chooses; and of course I am farther from him than ever! Do you call it honour, Katharine? I won't use the word you dislike to hear applied to your sister; I simply ask this: *do* you call it honour?"

"If I could hear Bella's account of it, I should probably call the whole thing sheer absurdity," said Katharine coolly. "As if Bella would stoop to any small meanness! as if Bella could care, except as an escort to and from her carriage, for a man like Mr. Whyte. He happened to murmur rather more about himself, and about his conquests, into her ear than into yours to-night, Dot, and you are weak enough to be angry. If it were otherwise—if I could believe for a moment that you ever had a serious thought of marrying Clarendon Whyte, and that Bella, directly or indirectly, kept you from doing so, I say that you should thank her as the best friend you have. In the first place, as you know, Mr. Whyte is poor, and poverty for the wife of a man like that would be simple and utter misery."

"Yet you advise me to marry Steven Lawrence?"

"Indeed I do not, Dora. After what you have been saying, I should be very sorry to advise you to marry any one. Steven Lawrence's fortune, humble as it is, might, with his habits, enable him to keep his wife in comfort. Mr. Whyte's fortune, with his habits, would, I should think, ensure to *his* wife starvation! So much I do say."

"You have grand ideas, Kate. You forget that every one cannot marry men like Lord Petres. If—

if—Clarendon Whyte had asked me,” cried poor little Dot, sadly, “I would have married him, and done the best I could. I like him, allez! He has brains enough for me. You know I don’t care for the way any of your friends talk. I never pretend to be clever. Even Steven Lawrence, though I dare say he can hardly read and write, bores me; I suppose because he is intelligent. I hate intelligence. I hate to hear about those horrid tropical beasts and plants, just as I should hate to have to go to the British Museum and look at them, and it’s all acting when I pretend to be interested in such things.”

“And what do you care heartily for, Dot dear? I have often wished to know.”

“I care for Clarendon Whyte’s conversation, Katharine. He talks of things that are really interesting.”

“Of himself, that is to say, Dot? For one evening of my life, very long ago, I brought myself to listen to Clarendon Whyte’s conversation, and, in as far as that distressing impediment of speech of his allowed me to follow him, I found that all his dark hints and little fragments of narrative told one story—the number of his conquests, and the quantity of peace of mind that he had wrecked.”

“Well, and if it was true!” interrupted Dora. “Can a man help being handsome, and gifted with that sort of fatal influence, I should like to know?”

“True or false, Dot, I think an honest man would keep perfect silence on such a theme. To boast, even mentioning no names, of such conquests, seems to me untrue to all our English ideas of manliness. For a girl, talking among girls, to make much of her little

ball-room triumphs, may pass, though I should not think over-highly of one who did. For a man to seek the reputation which that man seeks, he must be—a Mr. Clarendon Whyte! I can say nothing stronger.”

“But still, you see, I like him!” said poor Dot, with unanswerable logic. “I haven’t [your views of Englishmen and English honour. You say sometimes Clarendon Whyte is like the hero of a bad French novel. I dare say he is, and I dare say that is why he suits me. I haven’t the Fane nature—there is the truth. Your beau-ideal of happiness is to spend six weeks of the year in London, and the remainder at a country house, among wet fields, with dogs and guns and hunters. Mine is a little apartment on the fifth—sixth, seventh, if you will, but in Paris; and never to stir out of Paris till I die.”

“And Clarendon Whyte for a companion?”

“Clarendon Whyte, or some one else of his low intellectual standard; some one, at least, who would like what I liked, and always be well dressed and distinguished-looking, when we happened to go out together, and never want to come back to England. You think me a greater fool than I am, Katharine. In a life like that, I could make any sacrifice for my husband: live on bread and salad—and I know the meaning of what I say—anything, so that he could have his distractions, and me, mine, bien entendu! English middle-class comfort; heavy joints every day; suet puddings for the servants; plain dress and no amusements for the master and mistress—I hate it! I hate the very thought of it!” cried Dot, clenching one of her small fists. “And I hate the evil chance that first took me from a life that suited me better.”

"Dot," said Katharine, colouring, "that is ill said of you. Dislike England and English people if you will, but don't deny that papa has been your truest friend. Don't say that the home he gave you at the Dene was worse than the home from which he took you."

"I know that it has been a worse one to me," said Dot, unblushingly. Gratitude was not one of the virtues this poor little warped nature possessed. "If I had stayed in the Faubourg Saint Marceau, I should have grown up a bourgeoisie, of the smallest bourgeoisie, if you like—a milliner making up caps of six sous, who knows? but Parisienne! Parisienne!"

A glow of real feeling, which became her better than all rouge and gold-dust, came across her face. "Fifteen years! fifteen years of youth, I should have been living, not existing!"

"And what about the future, Dot?" asked Katharine; "all this might have been very well while your youth lasted, but for the future?"

"I should have died in Paris, at least," said Dot, quietly. "There is no use talking to you, Katharine. You English don't care a bit really for your country, or why should you run over the world as you do to get away from it? Love of Paris, with us Parisiennes"—she seemed to grow an inch taller as she said this—"is a passion. I'm like the queen—who was it?—when I die 'Paris' will be written on my heart! and, in the meantime, I shall marry Steven Lawrence of Ashcot—when he is wearied, that is to say, of his hopeless adoration of my beautiful cousin Katharine."

She laughed, one of those loud shrill laughs, which came with such weird want of music from her small



throat and baby mouth, and, kneeling down by Katharine's side, stretched out her little hands to the fire.

"Does Steven Lawrence really amuse you, as the tailor-poet did, Kate? or are you trying to make me accept him, as you used to make me take my draughts when I had the influenza, do you remember, by tasting them first, and pretending you liked them? When I saw you leave the box on his arm to-night, I could not help asking myself what the meaning of all the little play was. Katharine Fane—Lady Petres in a few months' time—showing herself before half London, on the arm of Steven Lawrence, yeoman farmer, of the parish of Clithero, Kent!"

"The meaning of the 'little play,'" said Katharine, stoutly, "is that Katharine Fane chose to please herself, just as she will continue to do when she is Lady Petres! If I had left Steven Lawrence to the tender mercies of you and Bella, you would, either of you, have thrown him over, if any one you thought better of had offered you an arm. And I did not choose that he should be thrown over! Putting your affairs altogether aside, Dot, I mean that Steven Lawrence shall be well treated in our house. Papa is sure to get on with him: Lord Petres likes him: I like him myself. As to being seen by half London on the arm of a yeoman, I would just as soon be seen there as on the arm of a duke. You know very well whether I have any nonsense of that kind in me or not."

"You are in a position where it is graceful to show humility, Katharine. The future wife of Lord Petres can afford, better than most women, to play at socialism—for as to believing any, yes, any Englishwoman is not an aristocrat at heart, I don't! Now confess, Kate,

as we are telling plain truths to-night, that you did feel ashamed of being seen with Steven Lawrence? I shan't think a bit the worse of you. Say it out."

"As we are speaking plain truths," said Katharine, "I will confess that I felt unaffectedly proud of Steven Lawrence the whole time that I was with him. It seemed to me that half the people in the crowd turned to look at him, Dot. Old Madame de Castro whispered to me in her bad English that I was on the arm of the only handsome man she had seen in England; the Phantom fought her way with her usual energy through the mob to ask me if 'our friend' would be in town for Lady Dacres' ball on the first? and how unconscious Steven Lawrence himself was of it all!"

"What! the Countess de Castro really said that of Steven Lawrence?" cried Dot. "The Phantom really offered to get him an invitation to the Dacres' ball? Well, you know, I do think him very handsome myself! I do think, by the time he gets more manner and style, he will be almost distinguished-looking. What did he say when you told him about Lady Dacres' ball?"

"I never told him about it at all, Dora. I can imagine no greater cruelty than to tempt a man like Steven Lawrence into going to a great London party. Why (as we shall be out of town), the poor fellow would not have a single person to speak to the whole night."

"As we shall be out of town!" repeated Dot, looking very blank. "Why, when do you mean to go home, Kate?"

"To-morrow, Dot, please. Now that Lord Petres is gone, I don't see the object of my staying any longer

—and I know Bella wants my room for some terrible maiden cousin of the General's; the rich Miss Dering who has been godmother to the whole of the children and never given anything but an illuminated book-marker between them yet! But my going has nothing to do with yours, unless you choose."

"Thank you, Katharine. If your sister would take me to every party and theatre in town, I would not stay under her roof when you are gone. To-night has opened my eyes to the extent of Arabella's *friendship* for me. And so to-morrow we return to our eleven months of country! Oh, dear! I suppose I may as well be off to bed. I shan't sleep, but there is nothing more to talk about here. What a weary play life is!" And Dot rose, yawned drearily, and then stooped and kissed her cousin on each cheek. Whatever small French customs the poor little thing had been allowed to retain—this among others—she clung to with almost touching pertinacity.

When she had got into the passage a sudden thought seemed to cross Dot's brain; and, turning the lock noiselessly, she re-entered her cousin's room, and walked back again to the fireside. Katharine, believing herself to be alone for the night, was already upon her knees at her prayers; and Dot had to tap her sharply on the shoulder twice before she could recall her to the things of this world.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Katharine—though how people can go in a moment from frivolous talk to religion is what I don't understand—but there's something I particularly want to ask you. Did—did—" Dora Fane actually had the grace to be half confused

—“did Steven Lawrence say anything to you about the photograph I sent him?”

“My dear Dora,” said Katharine, looking up from her kneeling position with beautiful dignity, “I have asked you before not to break in upon me like this. You would not interrupt me if I was kneeling at any earthly throne.”

“Because I should not have the chance,” cried Dot, another of whose missing virtues was reverence. “Please, Kate, don’t look so severe. If you prayed extempore, like Bella and the General, it would be different, but your high-church paters and aves can surely be taken up at any point where you like to break off. Now, did Steven Lawrence say anything about the photograph? I won’t keep you a moment.”

“He showed it to me, Dora,” said Katharine, with austere abruptness. Was it to be expected that she could treat any matter forced upon her at such a time with levity?

“Showed it?—does he carry it about with him? Oh, Katharine dear, does he wear it?”

“He does. In a locket.”

“And—thinks it like?”

“Very like.”

“And—you didn’t tell him anything, Kate? It was very foolish of me, but you know people say, in photographs, how alike we are—and I had not a copy of mine left—and really I never thought of anything serious at that time. Now, you didn’t betray me?”

“I don’t see what I had to betray, Dora.”

“And Mr. Lawrence seems satisfied?”

“Very. Still as he is neither devoid of reason nor eyesight, I should, if I were in your place, explain the

whole mistake to him at the first opportunity that offered itself."

"Good-night to you, Katharine."

"Good-night to you, Dora."

And then Dot took herself off for good to her own apartment (to fall asleep in five minutes and dream that she was a Parisian stage fairy with a parterre of men like Mr. Clarendon Whyte all throwing her bouquets), and Katharine Fane was left to finish her meditations in peace.

They kept her up later than usual to-night; for after what Dot called the "paters and aves," came a long prayer—the original of which was never learnt from any prayer-book or missal!—and when the beautiful face was lifted at last, unmistakeable traces of tears were on her cheeks. "Poor Dot's restless heart shall be brought to happiness yet, if I can help her there," she thought, as she laid her head on her pillow. "When—when I am married, they shall both come to stay with me, and in time I will bring Dot back to the true faith—and, perhaps. . . ."

And she slept, and dreamed of an old farm-house, and harvest-time, and Steven!—the pleasantest dream that Katharine Fane had ever dreamed in her life; but one from which the figures of Lord Petres and her cousin Dora were both, by some strange accident, missing!

## CHAPTER XIII.

### The Return to Ashcot.

THE east wind that had driven Lord Petres out of England was gone; soft rains had fallen in the night;

and all the Kentish lowlands were smelling sweet of summer, as Steven on the following afternoon drove from the village station, six or eight miles beyond Canterbury, to his old home.

He knew every object along the road by which he had to pass; the "two-bridges" that side by side, crossed the Stour and the canal; the cleft in the school-house wall through which the knotted ivy-roots had made no perceptible progress since he was a boy; the little roadside hamlet half way to Clithero, with its low red roofs and stagnant horse-pond and churchyard to whose white slabs ten years seemed scarcely to have made an increase; how strangely familiar it all was! Here and there, among the middle-aged and old, he came across a face he knew; but no answering look of recognition met him anywhere; the young people and children were of course absolute strangers, all; and Steven felt with a sort of pang that he belonged to a bygone generation as he looked at them. Would the people at Ashcot, would old Barbara, who had rocked him in his cradle, remember him if he was to appear suddenly in his own house without telling them what name he bore? An unwise fancy for trying the experiment took hold upon him as he drew near home; and as soon as he reached the first outlying cottages of the village of Clithero he stopped, discharged the carriage he had hired at the station, and going into a little vine-covered public-house by the roadside, asked the fresh-looking country girl who was standing within the bar, for a glass of ale.

The girl was about nineteen years of age, and as she handed the handsome stranger his tankard, with a blush and a smile, Steven Lawrence remembered her

face, and how a dozen years ago she had been one of the many child-sweethearts whose affections he had possessed in Clithero. Had she forgotten the very sound of his name? he wondered; was she called Polly—had she a real sweetheart now? He looked down at the girl's left hand, and saw with a childish feeling of satisfaction that it carried no ring. She was not married then. Little Polly Barnes, at least, remained out of the old buried life of his boyhood! Somewhat shyly he hazarded a remark or two about the neighbourhood, and Polly, setting him down as a tourist, began at once, with professional volubility, to make the most of all the great people within her small reach. It had been very dull in the country this spring, but most of the good families were coming back now. Lord Haverstock returned yesterday, and the Miss Fanes were expected in a day or two. The gentleman had heard of the Miss Fanes, of course?

Yes; the gentleman was familiar with the name.

Miss Katharine—or, indeed, Miss Fane, for poor Miss Dora was only a cousin—was to be married in the autumn to my Lord Petres, one of the richest noblemen in England, and a Catholic, which Miss Fane had always been inclined to, it being her own papa's religion, and it was expected it would be a very grand wedding, and—

“And what other people live about here now?” said Steven, cutting Polly short in her aristocratic histories. “I mean people of the lower class. Who holds Brenton farm?”

“Brenton farm? la, sir, what you know the neighbourhood then? Oh, old Tillyer leases Brenton still.

He has leased it for the last five and twenty years, I've heard my father say."

"And Ashcot?"

The girl shook her head. "Ashcot, sir, at present is farmed by Francis Dawes; but it belongs, you know, to the Lawrences. You've heard tell of them, no doubt?"

"I have," said Steven, "often heard their name. Joshua Lawrence is dead, I suppose?"

"Dead—yes, and his son, young Josh, after him," answered Polly; "broke his neck, as half the Lawrences do, sir, when he wasn't over sober; and now the land belongs to one Steven Lawrence, an idle, good-for-nothing sort of chap, I believe—ran away when he was a boy through jealousy of his cousin Josh, and nothing good been heard of him since. They do say he's expected home again now; but father thinks he's more likely to sell the farm for what it will fetch than come back and work on it. The Lawrences were always a bad lot, sir. Grandfather remembers them fifty years ago, and he says, grandfather does, in spite of their Wesleying ways, that running ashore a cargo of French silks and brandies on a dark night, and without giving the Queen her dues, was always the vocation" (Polly had been to boarding-school) "best suited to a Lawrence."

A quickly-checked smile came round the corners of Steven's mouth. Old Jacob Barnes, he remembered well, had, in his day, been one of the most noted smugglers of the whole coast, from Deal to Pegwell; and as he smiled, the girl looked at him fixedly.

"I—I'm almost certain I've seen your face before,



sir!" she cried. "Surely, it can't be? oh, la!" and Polly's round cheeks got crimson.

"Surely, it can't be Steven Lawrence himself!" said Steven, with his hearty laugh. "The idle, good-for-nothing kind of chap who ran away through jealousy of his cousin Josh? Ah, Polly, you're nicely caught. In spite of their 'Wesleying ways,' no occupation so fitted to a Lawrence as running ashore a cargo of French brandies without giving the Queen her dues! Now suppose, just to make up, and in remembrance of old days, you give me a kiss, Polly?" And Steven caught Miss Barnes's plump red hand and stooped his head down to her level. "You and I are very old sweethearts, you must remember?" he whispered.

"Oh, sir! Mr. Steven, please!" cried the girl, snatching her hand away from him; "you must excuse me for all I said, and—and everything else, sir. Times are changed, Mr. Steven, and—I was asked in church for the first time last Sunday. Peter Nash, sir, please, of the Mill."

Polly Barnes—the baby Polly, who used to tease to overload him with her kisses—"asked in church." Will you believe me when I say that Steven Lawrence felt a pang of actual pain at the thought? Polly Barnes blushing and looking conscious about Peter Nash of the Mill, the red-haired young ruffian whose head had so often received condign punishment from his own knuckles in the days when Peter had been wont to convey, by hideous faces and aggressive pantomime of all kind at meeting-house, his utter derision for Steven's turn-down collars and general fastidiousness of dress! How absolutely null, from Katharine

Fane down to little Polly Barnes, was his share in any human being's life! how entirely unmoved the whole world would have been if the 'Oneida' had foundered at sea, instead of bringing back the idle good-for-nothing Steven Lawrence safe to his native land. What a mistake this experiment was of gauging by too sharp a test the kind of remembrance in which his early friends held him! Better have given them all timely notice; better have had the fatted calf killed; better have been met, after his ten years of exile, with the outward welcome due to the repentant prodigal at least.

He left little Polly gazing after him, her hand shading the sunlight from her blue eyes, on the threshold of the inn door ("quite the gentleman now," thinks Polly, in her simplicity; "I shouldn't wonder if Lucy Mason, with all her pride, was to take a fancy to him!"): and in another ten minutes stood at the same angle of the old London road from whence he had looked back through his boyish tears at Ashcot, on that April night, ten years ago, when he believed himself to be quitting it for ever. The low white house, the homely garden, with the sweet May sunshine shining on its flowers, were unchanged; here at least was comfort! Whatever else had passed away, home was the old home still; and a feeling nearer akin to womanly weakness than he had known for years came with a sudden flood across the yeoman's stout heart as he stood and looked at it. He pushed his way through a gap in the flowering untidy hedge; there were a great many gaps in the hedges around Ashcot now; and a thrill almost like the thrill of love went through his blood. He was standing on his own land once more!

How fresh the grass fields looked, knee-deep in blood-red sorrel and foaming meadow-sweet, and with their tangled hedges of wild hop, briar and hawthorn!—Steven felt as a man, not a farmer, in this moment—how much fairer in his eyes was all this vivid English verdure than the bewildering exotic gorgeousness of the tropics, with which his eyes had grown sated! With what subtle power the delicate half-bitter aroma of the hawthorn touched his brain and brought back, as only the sense of smell can do, before him a hundred pictures: each bright and distinct, yet blending all mysteriously into one: of the happy springs before Josh and his mother ever came to Ashcot! He marched on through the tall weed-grown grass down towards the house, and a small boy at work in the next field, happening to spy him, threw up his arms in the air, and shouted out to him that he was trespassing! (When I use the expression “at work,” I use it in its most restricted and relative sense. No one worked much at Ashcot now; only, the boy happening to be a nephew of Dawes, the estate was charged with eightpence a day for providing him in birds'-nesting, rat-hunting, and other rural means of passing his time). Steven was immensely tickled at the idea of being warned as a trespasser off his own land, and sang out such a loud cheery “all right!” by way of answer, that the urchin concluded he was some friend of his uncle's, privileged to trample down standing grass or any other crop he chose, and went back to his present labour of threading birds' eggs on a reed with philosophic calmness.

“The place hasn't what I should call a look of work about it,” thought Steven, as he neared the house and marked the broken-down fence and straggling

branches of the little orchard, once so trim and orderly. "Four o'clock in the afternoon—the men can't be gone home yet—and not a soul to be seen. They must be at work round in the five-acres." And pushing open a wicket-gate, so shaky that it almost lurched off its hinges under his hand, he entered one of the side walks of the garden, the garden that had once been Mrs. Steven's special pride, and where, in Steven's childhood, every flower strong enough to bear the rough foreland blasts had been tended with loving care.

It was not, like the farm lands, actually neglected as yet; the borders were free from weeds, the walks were not grass-grown, such hardy spring flowers as wanted no especial nurture were in bright flower in the beds; the lilacs and guelder-roses above the parlour-window were all a mass of clustering odorous blossom. Steven walked round to the front porch, never doubting that he would see the door wide open, as in old days, the cheerful afternoon sun shining in upon the houseplace. The door, however, was not only shut but locked. The blinds in the front windows were all down; not a sound but the distant wash of the tide upon the sands, the humming of the great wild-bees among the honey-suckles that covered the porch broke silence. "Is a funeral going on?" thought Steven, "or doesn't Barbara take the trouble of living here, or what? Let no man try the experiment of coming back a day sooner than he is expected to his own house again!" He gave a long impatient pull at the bell, and on the instant a shrill chorus of pugnacious barks made itself heard within. After this came a woman's voice—how well he knew it!—bidding the

dogs "be silent, with their foolishness," and then the door opened, as far as a stout door-chain would allow, and he was requested by some unseen speaker, three or four sets of vicious teeth showing themselves ready through the chink for his legs, to make his pleasure known.

"My pleasure, Barbara," said Steven, as if he had not been absent a day, "is to come in. What the deuc is the meaning of all these bolts and bars and yelping curs, that you have taken to since I left?"

"Master—*Master Steven!*" cried the voice, a whole world of welcome in its tone. "Dear heart, that you should come like this—and me not so much as begun the cleaning!" And the chain was slipped, the dogs with one or two vigorous kicks were sent to the right-about, and an erect, handsome old peasant woman, her face white and quivering with emotion, came out into the porch. "Master Steenie—my boy—sir, how you have grown! but the same face, the same smile still!"

Steven seized both her hands in his, then kissed the withered fine old cheek, just as he used to do when he came home, a little lad, for the holidays, to be at once the torment and the pride of Barbara's life. "And so you remembered me at once, Barbara!" he said, as she clung to him, and gazed up in silence at his bronzed manly face—so fair and boyish when she saw it last. "I knew you wouldn't expect me for another week, at least, and I just thought I'd come upon you unawares and frighten you a bit. I met a good many faces I knew as I drove along from the station, Barbara, but I could see that I was a stranger to them all. You knew me by my voice alone."

"Knew you, Steenie? why I should have known you among ten thousand; and to think you should have come so! that you should have been made to wait on your own doorstep! Get along, Vixen—let me catch you sniffing anigh your master again, miss! 'Tis lonesome at Ashcot now, Steenie," added Barbara, in apology for the dog's ignorance, "and of an afternoon I mostly bar the door and let the dogs out to protect the house like. But please to come in, sir," she interrupted herself, breaking suddenly from familiarity to respect. "There's no fire in the parlour, but I can catch one up in a minute, and——"

"And what's gone of the kitchen, then?" interrupted Steven, walking straight on through the houseplace—wonderfully low this houseplace had become! he had to stoop his head not to knock it against the centre rafter now. "Have folks grown so fine of late years, that they must sit all day in the parlour, or what?"

And pushing open a door, he entered the comfortable old farm kitchen, where his grandfather's arm-chair still stood beside the open fireplace, his grandfather's watch still hung suspended over the mantelshelf, and felt himself at home! He had not felt so before since his arrival in England. The landing at Southampton; the short, too sweet episode of London and of Katharine Fane; his drive to-day among changed and unknown faces from the station; the first moment, even, in which he had trodden upon his own land; all had savoured of unreality—all in different ways had reminded him that he, Steven Lawrence, was an alien, and that his own country and his own people knew him not. Here, in the old farm kitchen, by the fireside where the Christmas songs of twenty years ago had

been sung, with Barbara, unaltered in face, and dressed in the same prim methodist fashion as of old at his side: the great clock ticking with its familiar burr, the jugs and dishes ranged in precisely the same order as they used to be upon the shelves; he felt that a place was still kept for him in the world. The past was at length bound up visibly, before his senses, with the present. He was at home.

"You look younger than ever, Barbara." And as he spoke he seated himself in the corner that was always called "Steenie's" when he was a child, and turned kindly to the old servant, who with wet eyes stood aloof and admired him, while she held a corner of her apron tight upon her trembling lips. "You, and the place by the fireside here, seem the only old friends I have left."

"Ay, lad, you may say so," she answered, coming close to him, but with instinctive delicacy remaining standing; for Barbara, like Polly Barnes, decided that Steven looked quite the gentleman now. "The Lord has pruned away the unprofitable branches. 'Woe to him,' we read, Steven, 'that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house that he may set his nest on high.' From the first day that I seen Mrs. Joshua—and an unhandier woman, and a foolisher, no ill respect to the dead, never entered a house—locking up here, and locking up there, as though those who had served her husband's family faithful would have stooped to rob *her*, and wasteful in her own ways as her son was after her—from the first day as I seen a fine lady flaunting about the farm, in her black sating and gold chain, and setting up her pony-shay and going to church, ay, and taking young Josh, a Lawrence by blood, with her 'because the gentry

didn't go to meeting-house,' I said to your mother, 'Mrs. Steven,' I said, 'those that live long enough 'll see want and ruin brought home to the Lawrences.' And my words were true ones, Steenie."

"Not quite, I hope, Barbara," answered Steven, cheerfully. "Josh didn't do over well for himself, I know, and I dare say I shall find things a good bit in arrears, but while the land's mine, and I've an arm to work it, I don't think we need talk of ruin, or want coming near you and me. Is Dawes about the rick-yard, or where? I must send one of the carts over for my luggage to the station, but I didn't see man or boy at work on the whole farm as I came down the close."

Barbara took her apron away from her lips, and passed it along the edge of the kitchen-dresser, already white and spotless as a new-washed platter. "Dawes is not here, Master Steven, nor the men neither, and there's no one at work. Me, and, maybe, young Bill Dawes, birds-nesting, are the only souls on the farm to-day."

Steven watched the expression of the old servant's face, as she answered him, and a quick suspicion of the truth crossed his mind. "Are the potatoes hoed, Barbara? is there no work of any kind going on? The hill side is potato-set this year, I see, but the ridges didn't strike me as looking over clean, from the distance."

"Master Steven," said Barbara, holding up her head erect, and folding her arms tight across her chest; "you musn't ask me how things are done on the farm now, sir. Except to tidy up a bit about the garden, for respect of those that are gone, and of you too, my



dear, far away though you were, I haven't left the house from one Lord's day to another, since Josh died. If I was to give my opinion, Steven, speaking from general knowledge of Dawes and his ways, I should say the potatoes was *not* weeded, nor hoed, nor anything done to them since they was planted. If you came down along the vicar's close and seen the grass, that rank and weed-grown as was the finest bit of hay for miles round, you needn't ask many more questions about the farm, I should say."

Steven got up and walked to the open kitchen-window, from whence the greater part of Ashcot farm was visible, and, at a glance, he took in its condition. The straggling fences, the wild rank grass, the partial growth of the green corn, the unhoed potato-fields—all, now that his eyes had got back the old business habit of seeing things, cried out aloud of neglect, of an unjust steward, of an absent master. He stood for a minute or more without speaking, then came back to the fireside, and stood there, his broad shoulders resting back against the high old-fashioned mantel-shelf, took out a pipe from his breast-pocket, and lit it.

"Barbara," said he, after he had smoked for two or three minutes, in silence, "I see pretty well how things stand. The cure will be short and sharp. How long has Francis Dawes treated the land like this?"

"Always, Master Steven," answered Barbara, laconically. "It was a year or so after you ran—after you left, sir, that your uncle first took him, him and his," and Barbara's eyes kindled, "upon the farm. Mister Joshua was failing in body and heart—there's the truth of it. What with his wife, and her fine-lady

ways, and young Josh's wildness, and your leaving us, Steenie, he wasn't to say the same for years before his death, and Dawes, bit by bit, got to do as he liked on the farm. Then came Mrs. Joshua's death, and your uncle's, and young Josh, who knew no more about the farm than a baby, was master."

"Go on: Dawes robbed the lad?"

"Steven," said old Barbara, "'rob' is not a word to use lightly. Everything on the place lay, as you may say, under Dawes' hand, and—"

"And he abused his trust? Speak out, Barbara."

Barbara hesitated, and her fingers twitched a little at the white kerchief that was pinned across her breast. To toil, to save for the Lawrences, had been, for more than thirty years, the beginning and end of her life. To see Steven back in his rightful place, and Dawes dispossessed, had been the one hope which had kept her steadfastly to the farm since young Josh's death. But it was a part of Barbara's religion to speak positive ill of no man. The Lord could execute His judgments, she was accustomed to say, without help or hindrance of hers. Steven might see with his own eyes the rank weed-grown meadows. Basing her opinion on broad and general grounds, Barbara did not hesitate to state that the potatoes had neither been weeded nor hoed once since they were planted. Such words as robbery or betrayal of trust, could scarcely have been evoked by less than torture from her lips.

"I reprove no man, Steven, and I rejoice in no man's fall. You will see the state of the farm, you will cast up Francis Dawes' accounts with him, and judge for yourself of the man's stewardship."

"That will I," said Steven, promptly, "The state

of the farm I have seen. The accounts, poor scholar though I am, I'll overhaul with Dawes to-night."

"Not to-night, Steven. Dawes and his sons are away to Stourmouth fair, and when they return 'twill be late, and—"

"And what else, Barbara?"

"Francis Dawes won't be just in a state to look over account-books with you, Steven—there's the truth."

"I see. We'll have them out to-morrow."

"To-morrow is the Sabbath, sir."

"I forgot," said Steven, hastily; "I've lived a life, Barbara, that has made me forget the days of the week sometimes; you do right to remind me. Monday, then, shall be the day of reckoning; and now—now let us talk of other things. How did my uncle die, and Josh? I believe when I was young, I was harsh on the boy. There was no other evil in him than being his mother's son, I believe."

"Evil enough," said Barbara, solemnly, "evil enough, the Lord knows! When once a lad has his head set up above his rank, and begins to hanker after the ways and follies of the gentry, Steven, he's pretty sure to end as Josh did."

Steven winced. "I should have thought from what they wrote me, Barbara, that Josh's vices were entirely his own. He didn't exactly contract his taste for gambling or drinking, by hankering after the ways of the gentry, I should say!"

"Master Steven, poor young Josh was gay—small blame to the boy, perhaps, taking into account the bringing up he got! There's no doubt of it," repeated Barbara, but with extreme leniency of tone, "young Josh was gay. But it wasn't that alone, nor foremost,

that brought him to ruin. There's many a lad has begun as bad or worse than him, and come right enough in the end, so long as he kept himself to the condition that was good enough for his fathers before him. While Josh only kept company with young Peter Nash and the other lads about, he was no worse than the rest, but once he had fallen in with Lord Haverstock he just walked on straight and opened-eyed to perdition, Steven. French wines for dinner, brandy and stuff o' the chemists the first thing in the morning; horse-races, cock-fighting, cards on the Sabbath evening, and a drunkard's death before he was twenty-one—that's about what lords and gentry did for Josh Lawrence!"

Steven knocked out the ashes from his pipe, and examined its bowl curiously before putting it back into his pocket. This kind of talk about lords and gentry jarred somehow, with extraordinary harshness, upon his present state of mind.

"Lord Haverstock was in petticoats when I left, Barbara. It makes me feel my age to hear you talk of him and little Josh as grown up men. How are the other families going on; the Squire, and his daughters?—the Miss Fanes, I would say."

Steven was not a coward under most circumstances, but it would have required greater courage than he possessed to tell Barbara that the Miss Fanes had known before his own people of his arrival, and that he had been with them to a London theatre; hankering already, like young Josh, after the ways and follies of the gentry!

"The Squire keeps his health, Steven, I thank you, and his lady hers, such as it is. Katharine Fane is to

be married soon to Lord Petres, a poor little white-faced creature, as high as that," said old Barbara, holding her large hand out level with her waist. "Never goes about without a French vally-de-shom, and a French cook for to mince up his meats for him, but as old a family as any in England, and rich, and a papist, so Miss Katharine will have her wishes at last."

"And the other one—Dora?"

"Dora's unmarried still, and like to remain so, from all I hear. What makes you so keen to ask about the Fanes, Steven?" and Barbara looked at him suspiciously.

"What makes me ask about the Fanes?" said Steven, with a short laugh; "why, idle curiosity, I suppose; the same that made me ask about everybody else. I'll tell you what I've a much keener interest in just now than any news of lords and gentry," he added, "and that is what you can give me for dinner. I've had nothing since eight o'clock this morning, and I'm as hungry as a hawk."

The colour mounted into old Barbara's face. "If you had given me a day's notice, Steven; but—well, lad, the truth's the quickest thing to tell—I shan't have much, unless you can wait an hour or so, to put before you. The Dawes' live in their part of the house, as you may say, and find themselves; and I live in mine, and find myself: and I was never one, as you know, to care much for butcher's meat. I'll run off to the village, and get in your dinner for to-morrow and to-day at once, and—"

"And if I hadn't come, what would your own Sunday dinner have been, Barbara?"

"A cup of tea, and a slice of bread and butter, is as good a dinner as I want, Steven. The smell of them Dawes' baked joints, hot on the Lord's day, is always enough to set my stomach against flesh-meat. You wouldn't take a cup of tea now, sir? just to stay your hunger, as I'm obliged to keep you waiting."

"Yes, indeed, I will," said Steven, heartily, "if you will take one with me, and help you to set it, too. Are the cups kept in the same cupboard still, Barbara?"

"Oh, Master Steven!" cried the old servant, when Stephen had helped her with the kettle, and was cutting huge trenches of bread and butter, just as he used to do when he was a schoolboy; "to think that you should have come back like this! When I first seen you, dear, I thought—"

"Thought what, Barbara? Have it out."

"That you had grown to be a fine gentleman like Josh, Steenie? but you haven't."

"I haven't, indeed, Barbara," said Steven, simply. "I'm not, and never shall be, a gentleman, but I believe, unlike Josh, I am thoroughly well-contented as I am."

And then the poor fellow thought, with a sudden pang, of Katharine, and of the world that Katharine would live in, and said no more.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### Church and Chapel.

THE next day was Sunday, and the news of Steven's return having spread like wildfire from the head centre of the Blue Peter, half the female population of

Broad Clithero flocked in new summer bonnets to the village Shiloh to look at him. It was five or six minutes after service-time when he reached the chapel—the well-remembered chapel, with its weather-stained whitewashed walls, and great square windows, upon which in high and stormy tides the spray beat across the narrow road from the Channel: and Steven was conscious that a great many ribbons fluttered, a great many faces were raised above their hymn-books to give him demure looks of scrutiny as he entered. He walked to the seat occupied by the Lawrences of old at the farther end of the chapel, a side seat from whence he faced nearly the whole of the congregation, and by the time the hymn was sung and the minister had got half way through the readings, had realised—but with a strangely blank sensation of disappointment—the life to which he had returned, and the people who were henceforth to be his associates and his equals! There was Polly Barnes, with apple-green ribbons on her hat, sitting by her sheepish red-headed lover's side (for Polly, a churchwoman by birth, had taken openly to dissent since her engagement); and Miss Lyte, the minister's mature sister, in a pink and lilac bonnet; and old Tillyer and his wife; and Mildrum of the village shop. All the old congregation in their old seats: only with ten years more of life written on their faces, and with a whole mysterious world of difference, it seemed to Steven, between himself and them!

He sat perfectly still, wearing an edifying face of solemnity, the congregation thought, while the minister read, and with thorough and stern humility took himself to task for the disappointment, bordering close on

keenest disgust, of which he was guilty. Who and what was he that he should look down upon the homely meeting-house that had been good enough for his fathers, the homely village people to whose class his father had belonged? Was he educated? Was he refined? What single advantage over the others could he boast that, after ten years of the life of a savage, he should come back and find them and their service, their unlovely chapel, and its close atmosphere, and the prospect of passing his life among them, so irrepressibly repugnant? Were not they, in sober truth, the human creatures to whom his birth and his circumstances fitted him? was not Katharine Fane—the unacknowledged cause of his discontent—a vision, just as far above him as the painted Virgin in the cathedral at Mexico was above the ignorant crowds whom he used to watch and pity, as they worshipped her, kneeling, from the pavement?

When the lessons were over came more singing, and Steven joined in it, aloud, and with as much of his heart as strenuous will could command. The hymn chosen was a quaint old "Scripture Wish," much in favour at Shiloh, of which the first verse ran thus:

"Daniel's wisdom may we know,  
Jacob's wrestling spirit too.  
John's divine communion feel,  
Moses' meekness, Martha's zeal.  
May we with young Timothy  
Ev'ry sinful passion fly!"

Not very fine poetry; but the voices of the singers were in tune, their hearts in earnest; and fond recollections of his childhood and of the days when his mother taught him to sing this very hymn began to



swell in Steven's breast, long before the five verses were sung through. After this came the prayer; a long extempore prayer, perfectly simple, perfectly adapted to the souls of which the old minister for thirty years had had the cure, and at its close a blessing was asked openly upon Steven Lawrence's return; an assurance given that however late an erring son might come back to his Father's house, forgiveness and peace would be in store there for him still, if he did but ask for them aright.

Steven, forgetful of the primitive habits of his denomination, had in no nowise prepared himself for this kind of public ovation; and felt more nervous than he had ever done before a Red Indian or grizzly bear in his life, when he had to stand up again and face the congregation; nearly all of whom—the proportion of women to men in Shiloh being about five to one—showed signs of recent tears. Might he be spared in the sermon! This was all he thought, as he kept his eyes steadfastly fixed on his book, and mechanically lifted up his voice in another hymn. Being prayed for, with the faces of the congregation hidden from him, had been ordeal enough. To be preached at, with every pair of eyes in the chapel watching to see how he took it, would be a thousand-fold worse; and he listened, with eagerness in which perhaps only a man who has been publicly offered up in the same way can sympathise, to hear what text the minister would give out.

It was not, as his worst forebodings had predicted, any selection from the parable of the prodigal son, but a long, and as he hoped, totally inapplicable text from Nahum (chosen, doubtless, before his return had been

known) commencing "She is empty, and void and waste," and continuing—for long texts were always approved of in Shiloh—to the end of the chapter. But Steven had forgotten the peculiar talent of the good old minister for applying any given portion of inspired truth to any given human exigency, when he built his hopes on such a weak foundation as seeming irrelevancy. Beginning with an exposition of the circumstances under which the inspired denunciation was given forth against sinful Nineveh, the old man through tortuous ways, and with covert allusions that told the ears of the initiated what was coming, led his subject on to the consideration of the wastes, spiritual and moral, that occur in our own times, in hearts given over to the world. He remarked upon the declension always to be traced in outward prosperity, whether of great nations or humble individuals, as habits of religion are neglected; finally turning round and fixing his eyes full on Steven, he spoke, in words devoid neither of pathos nor of a certain rough eloquence, of the long-forsaken duties, of the cold hearth to which a member of his flock had newly returned. He reminded them in plainest terms of how young Joshua, "drunken with wine," had been cut off in the midst of his sins and of his life; told of the mysterious wisdom which had guided Steven back by death and sorrow, even as it had guided the Israelites by a pillar of fire of old; and ended with a fervent prayer that affliction might not rise up a second time in Ashcot, that he who had gone astray might prove a chosen one of God at the last, and execute the judgment of peace and truth within His gates.

If a clergyman of the Church of England were to

give a like welcome to one of his flock, nine-tenths, at least, of his hearers would be wounded by the indelicacy of such public plain-speaking. But to the simple congregation of Shiloh the minister's sermon was a beautiful and a fitting one: and as Steven, with downcast face and a sense of being horribly and altogether out of his place, sat and listened, many and earnest were the prayers sent up that he might profit by the minister's words and become a shining light, as his grandfather (when not otherwise engaged at sea) had been before him, of the little community.

He lingered for some minutes in the chapel when the hymn succeeding the sermon was over; his head buried in his hands, as if in prayer, almost the first hypocrisy of Steven's transparent life, and devoutly hoping that the crowd would be well dispersed by the time he left the chapel. But no such luck was in store for him. As soon as he got to the door he saw the whole congregation, from the minister downwards, standing about in groups upon the low sandy slope that separated Shiloh from the shore; and before he had walked half a dozen steps his hands were being warmly seized, and "How d'ye do, Steven?" "How are you, Master Lawrence?" "Glad to see you back, sir!" sounded on all sides, according to the sex, and age, and condition of the different speakers.

Whatever asphyxia, bodily and mental, Steven had had to endure during the service, whatever indignation he had felt during the familiar personalities of the sermon, this hearty human kindness, the warmth of these friendly hand-pressures, of these honest voices, more than made up for it all. The minister, and the elders of the congregation, Mildrum of the shop, young

Peter Nash with blushing little Polly at his side, all crowded round to offer him heartiest welcome and good wishes. Old labouring men, whom ten years scarcely seemed to have made older, held out their hard, work-embrowned palms to his; small children, prompted by their mothers, stretched up their hands for his acceptance. One sturdy little chap of three, the first-born child of an old schoolmate, Steven, to the immense increase of his popularity, hoisted aloft on his strong shoulders and carried for half a mile or more along the road; the whole of the congregation talking, as they followed in slow procession, of the wonderful way the minister had spoke up, and the miracle it was to see Steeve Lawrence, after all his wild ways, come back a decent and a God-fearing man at the last!

About half-way between the chapel and Ashcot farm a narrow footpath led away through shady orchards and blossoming hop-fields up to the parish church, and into this path Steven turned, after bidding a friendly good-bye to such of the Shiloh people as were still in his company. The services of the church, according to country custom, were held at a later hour than those of the dissenters; and when a long up-hill walk had brought him at last to Clithero churchyard, the rector's gentlemanly unimpassioned voice, sounding through the open windows of the church told him that the sermon was still going on. He stood for a minute or more, his hat in his hand, to listen, then jumped across the rail that bounded the churchyard from the road, and made his way through the long, lush grass to the vault, close under the chancel window, where the Lawrences for generations past had been buried.

Clithero churchyard commands one of the fairest bird's-eye views on all that fair east coast of Kent. In the liquid noon light Steven could trace every well-remembered landmark of his boyish years; the marshes of Thanet, with their broad acres of tasselled reed-grass rippling in its early summer bloom; the pale grey line of coast from the Downs to Pegwell; the far-away Goodwin Sands (which even now he could not look at without a dozen romances of storm and wreck, and gallant-life boat rescue rising before his mind), the gauzy outline of Canterbury cathedral; the undulating course of the distant Thames. . . . If the dead can be affected by their place of burial, surely none in England sleep sweeter than those who lie in this upland yard; earth, sea, and sky above and around them; and the little Saxon church, with its quiet twelfth-century face that has seen the rising and the setting of so many forgotten beliefs, to watch their rest! Steven stood, bare-headed still, beside the Lawrences' vault, whose inscriptions old Barbara's hands had kept free of moss or rust, and felt, with a sense of remorse for the heresy, a great deal more "in church" under this blue sky, and with pure oxygen filling his lungs, than he had done in Shiloh. When the sermon was ended came a psalm: no hymn of modern composition, but a good old Tate and Brady; the organ deftly played, and a rich woman's voice leading the shrill trebles of the childish choir. The voice was Katharine's; for whatever her Romish predilections, Miss Fane was still a devout supporter openly of the Church of England; and as he listened every pulse of the yeoman's heart was set in quickened motion. I don't know—he did not know himself—whether any

hope of Katharine's having returned, and of his seeing her, had mixed with his pious desire to visit the old grave in Clithero churchyard: probably he was in a state already in which some leaven of his madness made its way into every action, every thought of his life! All he knew was that he was standing here in the sunshine, listening to her voice and feeling himself in heaven, and that he would have been quite content if the whole remaining fifty-one verses of the paraphrase had been sung. Mercifully for the congregation, who were not lovers, but hungry agriculturalists—impartial dispassionate Christians, who went to the distant church, or near at hand meeting-house, indifferently, and guided chiefly by weather—forty-nine of the verses were omitted. After this came the young rector's measured Oxford-trained voice again, giving benediction: then, succeeding a decent pause, could be heard the clatter of hob-nailed shoes on the stone floor, and a minute later the old clerk pushed open the inner door of the porch; scattering, with a fierce rush, a knot of irreverent babies who were placidly making daisy-chains in the shade; and church was "out."

Steven waited under shelter of the chancel yew until, according to the regulations of village etiquette, the whole congregation had left; first the poor people from the body of the church; then the school children and the gentry's servants from the gallery; then the farmers—very few of this class were church people in Clithero—and finally "the gentry" themselves; a tall, weak-faced young man whom, from the family likeness and universal doffing of hats, Steven took to be Lord Haverstock; after him the Squire and Dora; and lastly

Katharine with the young rector, already divested of his gown, walking at her side.

Dora Fane, Steven's senses told him, wore a bright silk and a butterfly kind of bonnet, and held a white parasol above her head. Of Katharine, all he could tell was that she looked fresher and fairer than ever in her summer dress, and that a more earnest glow than usual was on her face as she turned it and listened graciously to the handsome young rector's talk. Here was another of her slaves, he thought; the same horrible pain rising in his breast as he had felt when he saw her with George Gordon. Peer or parson, fine London gentleman or rough-hewn yeoman, this girl brought them all alike to her feet, and smiled upon them all! He went back quickly, without turning to look at her again, the way that he had come across the churchyard; and when he got into the road found the Miss Fanes and the Squire, without the rector, about a dozen yards distant to the right.

Katharine advanced towards him with an outstretched hand. "Mr. Lawrence, surely you were not in church? I'm so glad we have met you. Dot and I only came back late last night. Papa, this is Steven Lawrence. Now, should you have recognised him?"

"Recognised him? Of course I should," cried the Squire, a stout rosy little man, with wide-open good humoured eyes and three-cornered grey whiskers, much more like a yeoman, to look at, than Steven. "The ladies talked me into believing you so altered, Lawrence, I thought I mustn't trust my own eyes when I met you, and now I see no change in you at all, except your growth. You're as like your grandfather as two peas, allowing for difference of age. How do you

find the farm? A good deal run to waste, eh? Well, I gave you a hint through Miss Dora's letter. No eye like a master's, Lawrence, you know—no eye like a master's."

Mr. Hilliard was shaking Steven's hand heartily all this time, and had really welcomed him out of the warmth of his heart; but something patronising, in his tone rather than in what he said, jarred on Katharine; more, to speak the truth, than on Steven, who was not keenly sensitive in such matters, and indeed was thinking much more of her just then than of the Squire, or of how the Squire chose his words.

"I hope the farm won't take up so much of your thoughts that you'll have no time to come to the Dene?" putting her hand as she said this within the Squire's arm. "You know you promised us in London that we should see a great deal of you!" and her fingers gave a little significant pressure which bade her stepfather give weight immediately to what she said.

"Yes, Lawrence, of course;" for, like most men, the Squire was in a state of abject subjection to Katharine. "Of course we shall expect you to be a good neighbour. Now, what's to-morrow? Monday. Well, will you come and dine with us to-morrow? Six o'clock, and no ceremony, you know: just come as you are, and help us eat our leg of mutton, and we'll have a talk over parish matters afterwards."

Steven accepted the invitation with most unconventional readiness, and with a glow of pleasure on his handsome face; Dot having first interpolated some pleasant little insincerity of her own; and then the Squire's carriage drove up, and Katharine gave him her hand again and her smile as they drove away,



and Steven was left looking after her, with a nimbus of gold cast around Clithero churchyard, and the dusty road, and every other prosaic object of this prosaic world.

"He's a good-looking lad, that," said the Squire, as they were driving home through the lanes. "If Lawrence was a gentleman, we should have a good many of the young ladies breaking their hearts about him—eh, Dot?"

"Unfortunately, he isn't a gentleman," retorted Dot, upon whose temper four-and-twenty hours of the country were already telling. "I think Lord Haverstock, in spite of his being a lord! a much better-looking man than Steven Lawrence. Yes, I am sincere. I can't get up these sylvan tastes, as Katharine can, at a moment's notice. I *cannot* appreciate men who walk about with rough brown hands and no gloves!" and Dot threw herself back into her corner of the carriage, and sighed—thinking, no doubt, of the pretty little white hands and lavender gloves of Mr. Clarendon Whyte.

Katharine's face flushed. "I think Steven Lawrence is a gentleman, papa," she cried. "If I did not think so, I shouldn't ask him to come to our house. To my mind, he is far more refined, in his absence of all pretence, than many a man who understands every observance of what is called society, and when he comes to the Dene, I, for one, shall make him feel that I look upon him as an equal!" Here she stopped short.

"Kate," remarked the Squire, "if you want to be a friend to the young man, as no doubt you do, put all these ideas about 'gentlemen' out of your head, or

at all events don't put them into his. The Lawrences are not gentlemen in any sense of the word whatever. Old Isaac Lawrence, this lad's grandfather, used just to wear a smock-frock and live with, and like his men, and I don't think Joshua Lawrence or his son took much by trying to get out of their own condition. This young Steven seems a fine, plain-spoken fellow, and I shall be glad to be a friend to him; but if you are going to turn his head with any of your sentimental democracy, Kate, the kindest thing I could do, would be to bid him never set his foot within my doors. To go to meeting-house, associate with his equals, and work the plough with his own hands, is the way to bring round Ashcot—not playing at any new fangled nonsensical principles of equality and fraternity, with you for a play-mate, Kate."

"You are thoroughly prejudiced, papa," cried Katharine, hotly. "Nothing short of all our heads being cut off will convince you, as it convinced the people of France once, that opinions *are* progressing—that ridiculous distinctions of class *are* passing away, even in this blessed weald of Kent, as everywhere else in the world!"

"The difference between you two always seems to me to be this," cried Dot, who, little burthened though she was with either sympathy or imagination, could make sharp enough hits, at times, in her judgments on better people than herself—"one plays at democracy, and is an aristocrat, heart and soul; and the other plays at conservatism, and is a radical in practice. We'll see, at the end of three months, who is the truest friend to our ploughman protégé, Uncle Frank, or you, Katharine!"

"We will see," said Katharine, but not without wincing in her heart at the prophecy Dot's words contained. "For you, Dot, I know very well Steven Lawrence, without kid gloves, as you say, and earning his bread with his own brown hands, can never be anything but Steven Lawrence, yeoman. You measure every coin by the stamp, not the metal!"

"Of course I do," said Dot. "So must any one with a grain of sense, I should say. Silver is silver everywhere, but a shilling won't pass current out of England, or a franc out of France, will it? It seems to me, Kate, that the stamp, not the metal, is exactly what *does* make the market value of most things!"

In saying which she spoke with the most complete and unaffected sincerity. Belief in the existence of any thing or quality, to whose value a market test would not apply, was an act of faith quite beyond the narrow reach of Dot's soul.

## CHAPTER XV.

### A Story of Family Affection.

IN the year eighteen hundred and thirty-four, more than thirty years before the date at which this story commences, two north country gentlemen, of the name of Fane, were married on the same day, at the Catholic chapel of York, to two sisters, "the young and beautiful daughters of the late Honourable John Vereker," the county newspapers recorded when announcing the wedding. There was very little money on either side: good birth and good looks being the chief portion of the brides, a commission in the army and three or four thousand pounds each the fortunes of the Fanes; and

neither marriage turned out a particularly happy one. In less than a twelvemonth Geoffrey Fane, the elder brother, was forced, by extravagance and debt, to sell out of the army; went away with his young wife to the continent, and disappeared there. Ten or eleven years later, after a great deal of poverty and discontent, Richard, the younger one, died suddenly, leaving his widow to subsist, with her two children, upon her scanty pension and the interest of such money as the recent purchase of his majority had left out of her husband's capital.

Mrs. Richard Fane was a very pretty woman still at the time of her bereavement: one of those pink-and-white angelic women with beseeching eyes, mild ill-health, and fragile, dimpled, helpless hands, so well suited to enact the rôle of inconsolable widowhood, and so certain not to enact it overlong! Before Richard Fane had been eighteen months dead, the Squire of Clithero, walking about on the Scarborough beach, fell in love with this tender creature—still in weeds and a fair little daughter on either side—and, at the expiration of the conventional two years, Mrs. Fane had, to use her own words, "secured a home and protector for her Richard's children" by becoming Mr. Hilliard's wife.

Whether Mr. Hilliard had secured his own happiness by marrying her was a problem from attempting whose solution he himself sedulously shrank to his life's end. As his wife's suffering state of health and beseeching, ill-used expression of face continued the same, she was ever, traditionally, to him a kind of domestic angel upon whom this lower world bore too hard, and whose thorny path it was his duty to smooth through submission to all those little unevennesses of mood by

which angels, in domestic life, are beset. "She gave up all for me!" the poor Squire would say, with tears in his eyes, when any intimate friend got him on the subject of his household troubles; "her determination of never marrying again, the name that I know now was dearer than life itself to her heart, her religion—all! I should be a brute, by——! a brute, if I didn't bear her poor little infirmities with patience. What should I have been, sir, if I had not met with that woman? That's what I ask myself."

A much happier man, would probably have been the true answer; but such a heresy never even crossed the Squire's imagination. He was one of those commonplace men, who, with silent heroism, will bear the tyranny of a weak and selfish woman throughout their lifetime, and in their inmost hearts for ever upbraid themselves that they have not bowed their necks sufficiently low beneath the yoke! His wife's bodily feebleness, her incapacity, real or alleged, of getting into the open air except during the hottest summer weather, her querulousness, her want of reason, all appealed to the Squire's kindly heart, much as a baby's weakness appeals to a patient nurse. And then—yes, even at this present time, when they were both of them nearer fifty than any other age—he continued not a little in love with her still. She was so delicate and fragile, so foolish, so girlishly fond of dress and attention, even in her advanced middle-age, that the Squire never could realise to himself that his wife was already an old woman, and loved her, as I think rougher, more sterling wives at forty-eight are seldom loved. "No man will ever care for me as papa does for you, mother," Katharine would say; "I'm too strong, and

large, and well able to take care of myself, ever to be made an idol of!" And Mrs. Hilliard, with a little sigh, would take the remark quite as a matter of course: then bid her daughter be thankful that she was as she was. Excessive beauty, excessive attraction, did not bring happiness to their possessors, "or why should I, Kate, have had your dear, dear father, and my rank in life, and religion, and everything else, taken from me, and now spend the life of suffering that I do?" That she had been very discontented in the poverty of her first marriage, and was extremely comfortable in the luxury of her second one, were the facts of the case; but Mrs. Hilliard lived in a sentimental ideal world—with a population of one—from whence facts were rigorously excluded. And even Katharine, with all her stout common sense, could never, in her childish days at least, feel sure that her pleasant home at the Dene, and her garden, and her pony, and the Squire's affection, were not good things that had been purchased for her at the terrible price of her mother's martyrdom.

Dora's appearance on the scene did not occur until about a year and a half after Mrs. Hilliard's second marriage. Up to this time the Squire had always believed his wife to be an only daughter, and it was by purest accident, and from an alien source, that he abruptly discovered at last that there had been another sister, married also to a Fane, and the mother of one child. On cross-examination, Mrs. Hilliard confessed that she had been accustomed to write to the Geoffrey Fanes during the early years of her first marriage, but that, somehow or another, the correspondence had been allowed latterly to drop. In the last letter she ever received from them, more than seven years ago, Geof-

frey himself was said to be dying in Paris; his wife in failing health; and every shilling of their money spent. "And I sent them twenty pounds, Mr. Hilliard," she added, "little as my Richard and I could afford it, and for *your* sake, and to spare *your* feelings, have never spoken of poor dear Theodosia since I married you."

"And the child?" cried the Squire, looking for once with indignation, bordering on disgust, at his wife's calm pink-and-white face. "Eight and seven—God bless my soul! if the girl lives she must be fifteen. What will have become of her in these years, if both of her parents are dead?"

Mrs. Hilliard answered hysterically, that she was sure she didn't know; and it was very cruel, in her weak state, to call up such dreadful images of her own flesh and blood. If Mr. Hilliard had the slightest delicacy of feeling, he would know what it must cost any one of her sensitive nature to imagine, even, that a sister or a sister's child could want! If she had thought such bitter things would have been said, she was sure she never would have mentioned her poor Theodosia's name to him at all:—then to her room and sal-volatile.

The next morning the Squire packed up his port-manteau, and started off alone to Dover, speculating, somewhat, on the journey as to whether sainted invalids have much feeling for aught besides themselves or not. He had a good deal of work to do in Paris before he could find the faintest clue to Geoffrey Fane or his family; but English gold, liberally spent, and assistance from the police, brought him, after four days, on the right track. Geoffrey Fane died on a fifth floor in the Boulevard de l'Hôpital about seven years ago; his wife had only survived him by a twelvemonth; and

his child was, or had been till lately, the apprentice of a woman living Rue Mouffetard, 57, and fripière-modiste (half pawnbroker, half milliner, that is to say) by trade.

With forebodings of he knew not what: with a heavier sense of shame than any that in his whole upright life he had known before, the Squire took a fiacre, within five minutes after receiving tidings of his wife's niece, and drove, through quarters of Paris into which the "walks" of Galignani had never brought him before, to the Rue Mouffetard—the principal street of that singular twelfth arrondissement which borders the Bièvre, and where washing, bleaching, and tanning are the exclusive occupations of the community. He stopped, as he had been directed, at Number 57, and discharged the fiacre. "Madame Mauprat?" said a little old woman, who was tottering under a hideous pyramid of untanned skins into the court-yard; the Squire having three times repeated the name before his English pronunciation rendered it intelligible. "Yes, yes. Madame Mauprat lived on the entresol, of course. Par là, mon petit Monsieur, montez, montez!" So the Squire groped his way to a dirty, very nearly dark staircase; mounted; and on the stage of the entresol rang a bell, which he guessed, for it was too dark to read if any name was written there, might belong to Madame Mauprat.

It was answered by a child apparently of about eleven years old; a thin, dark-eyed child, exquisitely neat, in an old black alpaca frock, with gilt earrings in her ears, a ring on her hand, fair hair taken back à la Chinoise from her face, and a little cap on the back of her head. She gave him a curtsy and a



smile; the Squire caught an expression like little Kate's at home about her lips, and his heart beat thick.

"What is your name, my dear?" he said, in English. "Don't be afraid; I've come here to be your friend."

The child made him another curtsey, or rather another series of bows and smiles and curtsies, and begged him, in French, to give himself the trouble to enter. "Anglais, no—var leetle!" she added, turning round, and looking like Kate again as the Squire followed her into a little shop, with caps and bonnets on a tiny round table and a rose-tree and bird-cage in the apology for a window. "Donnez vous la peine de vous asseoir M'sieur. La patronne va rentrer tout de suite—de tree minute—M'sieur comprends?"

So the poor Squire found himself thrown upon his French, entirely composed of substantives—"oui," "nong," and "avez-vous"—and in this language proceeded to ask her questions. "Avez-vous père and mère? Anglais? Mort? Argent? Beef and Moutong?" assisting his little hearer's comprehension of each question by such pantomimic show of taking out a gold piece and holding it to her, pretending to eat and drink, et cetera, as seemed to him best suited to her tender years and capacity.

With thorough self-possession, and with more and more smiles: for his gold watch-chain and gold pieces, and the nation to which he belonged, were facts perfectly intelligible to her, whatever his French was: the child stood before him and gave her answers. Her father and mother were dead, more years ago than she could tell. They were English, both of them, and had died here in Paris. She had lived with the patronne

ever since. Money? Eh, *mon dieu*, M'sieur—with a shrug of her small shoulders—not too much of that. And beef and mutton? Yes, on a Sunday, sometimes. And amusement—pleasure? . . . Ah, M'sieur would say distractions! Oh, for that—yes! There were the balls of the Barreaux Verts, and the concerts at the Petit Bicêtre; and once she had been to Asnières; and once—with conscious pride this—to Mabilles! M'sieur was English? M'sieur did not inhabit Paris?—looking at him with pity. Ah! M'sieur would not be acquainted, then, with the places where she found her distractions, even if she were to name them.

The Squire looked at the little creature, as she babbled on, with a pity for which I can find no name. He was not at all a philosopher. It would never have occurred to him that the life of a milliner's apprentice in one of the poorest quarters of Paris: making up caps of six sous each, and dancing among the washing-girls at the Sunday balls: might be a life out of which some human creatures could get a good deal of enjoyment. For a girl of English birth, the daughter of an English gentleman, the cousin of little Kate at home, to have spent her childhood among vile, immoral French people (everything not English was vile and immoral to the Squire), was desecration that made his blood boil as he thought of it. And when the "patronne" herself entered, some minutes later, nothing but the impossibility of being abusive without adjectives withheld him from giving his opinion of her, and of the rest of her country-women, on the spot.

Madame Mauprat was a stout, well-featured woman of about fifty, Norman, not Parisian, by birth, and with something of country frankness still discernible in

her speech and manner. Monsieur's business? Ah, ha! Monsieur wished information about the little Bébé. And how was she to tell then—no offence—that Monsieur's intentions were frank, and that it would be her duty to answer him?

"Argent," answered the Squire, laconically. "Argent Anglais," chinking the money in his pockets. "Vous parly, and I pay."

In all his continental travels, experience had taught him that this was a short but infallible road to the foreign conscience; and Madame Mauprat proved no exception to the general rule. Her quick Norman instinct for scenting a bargain made her grasp in a second every detail of the situation. The Bébé's English relatives had found her out at last, and wanted to purchase her. Now the thing was to raise the value of the article in demand to the uttermost. She put her arm round Bébé's shoulder—the girl opening great eyes at such a demonstration—drew her to her side; and without more than the necessary arabesque of falsehood, told her story. In 1841, Madame Mauprat had had a lodging in a house on the Boulevard de l'Hôpital, a poor fifth floor, of which an Englishman with his wife and child shared half. The man died; and the widow with such money as she possessed, a miserable five hundred francs! entered into business as modiste—fripière-modiste, Madame Mauprat pretended to be no higher in the world than she was—with her neighbour. "And a bad bargain was struck for me that day, Monsieur," added the woman, shaking her head at the recollection. Madame Veine—that was the English lady's name? the Squire nodded; could neither work nor mind the business; could do nothing,

in short, but to take to her bed and weep. Monsieur might figure to himself how prettily a long illness would eat up the profits of a poor little commerce like hers! Well, at the end of a year, Madame Veine died, leaving her to pay the expenses of the doctor and the funeral, and with this fillette that Monsieur saw—this Bébé on her hands! What to do? The child was an expense and no profit; too small to work—look at her now, fifteen years old, and a little doll, an atom, a Bébé as she was! but what will you? Madame Mauprat had the heart of a mother, and couldn't give her up as her friends advised, to the police. Since that time Bébé had eaten of her bread, and shared her room, and been to her as her own child. And Mauprat raised a corner of her shawl to her eyes, and wept.

"Combieng?" said the Squire, with a face of parchment.

"Monsieur!" sobbed the Frenchwoman.

"Combieng," repeated Mr. Hilliard. "Le petit fill pour moi. Combieng?"

Madame Mauprat became indignant; the Squire spoke of the police; finally, the child herself was appealed to. She put a little thin hand at once into her new protector's, and said that she would go with him; and after this the "patronne" had nothing to do but make as good a money bargain for herself as possible. The Squire paid down his English gold with royal liberality. "After all," said he to himself, "the woman may have saved the child from the foundling hospital;" and in half an hour's time Bébé, or rather Dora Fane, was seated by his side in a fiacre, and driving with him through the tortuous streets of the Faubourg St.

Marceau towards the distant Rue de Rivoli, where he lodged. There was no doubt whatever as to the child's identity. The Geoffrey Fanes had lived in Paris at the time of her birth: and her certificate of baptism, a few old letters, and a note-book of her father's, had all been sold, one by one, by Mauprat to the Squire. This little work-girl, in her white cap, and with her ideas and manners of the twelfth arrondissement, was the treasure that he had brought up from the lowest social strata of Parisian life to be the acknowledged niece of his high-bred wife, the daily companion of Bella and little Kate at home.

The poor Squire was simply and literally too much afraid of his own work to take the child back to England at once; so wrote a preparatory letter to Mrs. Hilliard first; then spent two or three days in Paris alone with little Dora. Before they had been six hours together a great deal of the child's English, disused rather than forgotten, began to return to her, and coming to the help of the Squire's French, enabled them to understand each other admirably—under no circumstances, perhaps, would a man with a heart like Mr. Hilliard's, and a pocket full of money, find it very hard to make a child understand him! The first thing to be done, he thought, after returning to the hotel, ordering a room for her, and writing his English letter, was to give her some beef and mutton. So taking her hand, he walked her off to the Palais Royal—it was about five o'clock of a summer's afternoon—and ordered a dinner at the restaurant of the Trois Frères. A dinner suited to Ma'mselle, he told the waiter; plain roast meat, and plenty of sweets and fruits, and all the things a child of her age would like. You may believe

how Dora, who had never tasted anything more dainty than galette and cherry compote in her life, and who had only eaten a plate of water-soup that day, enjoyed herself. The roast meat she would not look at; but vegetables, hors-d'œuvres of all sorts, marrons-glacés, ices, creams—all of these the little famished creature ate greedily, and at last, when she could absolutely do no more in the way of present consumption, waited till the garçon, who was serving their table had turned his back, then plunged both her hands into a dish of candied fruits, and began briskly to fill her pockets, with a face and air of quiet unconcern that tickled the Squire's fancy immensely.

This was Dora's first experience of the sweetness of riches. When they had left the restaurant they walked, hand in hand, about the colonnades; the Squire quite unconscious of the singular discrepancy in their appearance, and the smiles and remarks that were freely bestowed on them by the crowd; and after a time the child was told that she might buy any little trinket she liked for her own. She was modest as yet; could not, in fact, realise the enormous wealth of her new protector; so walked him up to an open stall, where "Imitation" was written in black and yellow letters a foot long, and chose a pinchbeck locket of three francs. Next morning she proposed a visit to the Palais Royal again; stopped before a window "en Or," got the Squire inside, and was seized with violent admiration for a tiny doll's watch of one hundred and forty francs. Mr. Hilliard gave it her; and then there must be a chain to hang it from; and then there was a brooch, and a ring—"Ah, but a ring, m'sieur, that would go so well on my small finger!" And then the

Squire, beginning to see of what materials his new-found treasure was made, got out of the shop and out of the Palais Royal as quick as his legs would carry him.

This was on Saturday: they were to leave Paris early on Monday morning; and Dora conveyed to her friend, her uncle, as she already called him, that it would be proper for her to have some new clothes, a pretty dress, and a jacket, and a bonnet—how her heart throbbed at the thought! above all, a bonnet to appear in on Sunday. These, of course, were matters respecting which the Squire was powerless in the child's hands. "Not too dear," was all he said, as they stopped at the different shops on the Boulevard; and "not too de-are!" Dora always replied, with a wise shake of her head; then went in and bought exactly what dress, bonnet, gloves, and parasol suited her fancy.

On Sunday afternoon it must really have been a picture to see the two sally forth for a walk in the Champs Elysées. The portly little Squire with his English frock-coat and light waistcoat, and close-shorn English face, Dora in a silk robe, worn long to the ground for the first time in her life, cream-coloured gloves, white parasol, tiny pink bonnet, and the airs and graces of a Parisienne of thirty! She walked along in a sort of ecstasy, barely feeling that her feet trod on solid earth through the Champs Elysées, and just as they were reaching the Bois de Boulogne her cup of joy was filled to the last drop of overflowing: two of the washing-girls of her old quartier walking with their sweethearts in blouses, passed; then turned round and gazed at her! She looked with sublime unconcern

at the string of carriages in the road, as though all acquaintances of hers must be *there*, not in the foot-path, and realised how utterly she had done with her old life and all the people belonging to it. It seemed a hundred years since Thursday night, when these very girls, out of their scanty savings, had given her a ticket, and taken her with them to the gallery of the Ambigu. How delicious to think that they would go home and tell Hortense and Delphine and the rest that they had seen the little Bébé in a silk robe and a bonnet, and walking with a gentleman, and too grand—oh, much too grand and fine a lady to speak to *them!*

After their walk they had dinner at one of the summer restaurants of the Bois de Boulogne, and as they were sitting at dessert the Squire asked the child what she would like to do to finish the day? He knew that a girl of her age, brought up in Paris, would have no idea of Sunday save as a day of amusement; "and if I never commit a greater sin," thought he, "than letting her have a boat on the lake or a ride in a merry-go-round on her last day in Paris, my conscience will be a white one!" And so he put the question to her.

"Amusement? somezing give me plaizir?" said Dora, repeating his words after him. "Ah, que, m'sieur, est bon! We will go——" Her heart cried to one of the balls of the Barreaux Verts, to look on, too grand to dance (except perhaps with young Oliver, the butcher of the faubourg), and eclipsing Hortense and Delphine, and the whole world she knew, with her dress and her watch, and her general aristocracy of appearance. This was her first impulse; then she



looked wistfully at the Squire, shook her head with an instinctive feeling that a ball in the twelfth arrondissement would not perhaps be quite the place for him, and said boldly, "To Mabilles!"

The Squire jumped up from his chair with horror.

"Mais, mon dieu, nous sommes très très bien!" cried Dora, thinking he might be too modest, perhaps, to present himself in such high society. "Zay refuse—no! zay admit us—yes!"

"Admit us!" said the Squire; "yes, I suppose they would! Me at Mabilles—on a Sunday! Come away, come away, child!" And Dora was walked back to the hotel; and after a long sermon from the Squire, went to her bed that night with a sense of a new wide gulf between her and him, and a dim idea that she had better never tell the truth on any subject whatsoever as soon as she found herself among her rich relations in England.

Stunted in her moral as in her physical growth, the poor little creature had really, up to the age of fifteen, continued shielded, by her very incapacity, from the knowledge of evil as of good. A robust, more loving nature would probably in these early years have contracted far more positive harm than had Dora's. She had liked going to the balls of the barrière, not for any notice that was ever taken there of her own meagre little face, but for the sake of looking at the toilettes, most of them furnished by her own patronne, of the washing-girls; or of sitting in a corner apart from the crowd, with some other child of her own size, and "making believe" that they were grand ladies in long silk dresses, with a carriage and livery servants to conduct them home. Had liked standing tiptoes in the

galleries of the cheap theatres, when any one would treat her to a place there, not, as more highly-endowed children of her age will do, dreaming premature dreams of love or romance, and seeing herself in the beautiful princess, or weeping Aventurine, with Prince Charming, and all the other handsome lovers at her feet! Love and romance were things of which not the faintest whisper had entered the child's prosaic life. At the balls of the *barrière* she had amused herself with admiring the poor bits of finery of the washing-girls. At the theatre her pleasure had consisted in watching the dresses of the actresses, or of the ladies far down below in their boxes; wondering what they could have cost; speculating how she one day would dress if any turn of luck, such as befalls poor orphan girls, on the stage, should find her with full pockets! Dress to this little child of Paris was the sum of human existence: theatres and balls, and the Boulevards on a Sunday were places to show it in; and every effort, every sacrifice of life, means wherewith to buy it. She had never seen very much of virtue; she had never heard anything at all of vice. Some ladies had to wear high-up cotton dresses; and others—on the stage, and in the lower boxes—were in such a state of beatitude as to possess shining silks, and necklaces, and to show their bare shoulders. She hoped when she was a woman she would be like these latter ones; and not, at all events, marry a working-man, a tanner, or rag-collector, as she had known some of her friends do, and live for ever in a miserable room, with dirty children, and kicks from her husband's sabots whenever she tried to go abroad for her pleasure! This was about the extent of Dora's social generalizations. The

Squire, too simple of heart, too narrow of mind to have any, save the most literal black-and-white ideas of right, had been absolutely staggered, thrown out of all his bearings of morality, by the girl's unblushing proposal of Mabelle on the Sabbath; and so at once laid the foundation of her whole future deterioration of character—hypocrisy!

"Say as little as you possibly can about Paris, my poor child," was the burthen of all his advice to her during their journey home. "Your aunt is a very pious woman, and your cousins must never hear the name of—of such places as you mentioned on Sunday!"

And the child, nodding her small head, and looking wise, told him always he need not fear. "Bals de la barrière—no! Theatres, no! Mabelle—no, no, no!" The climax with a burst of virtuous warmth highly satisfactory to the Squire in this his first attempt at moral training.

The five minutes succeeding the arrival of the travellers at the Dene were minutes never to fade from Dora's recollection while she lived. The poor little girl had not been used to much kindness! of love she knew not the meaning; but she had been accustomed, at least, to the bonhomie of manner which French people, of all classes and professions, show towards children; and when the companionship of the kindly Squire was suddenly exchanged for the presence of Mrs. Hilliard and her eldest daughter, whatever heart there was in the child's small breast froze up at once, and as far as they were concerned, for ever. Mrs. Hilliard, unapproachably stately in her soft laces, and invalid shawl, and easy chair, just touched her niece's

cheek with her lips, then remarked—with a look at the Squire, that made him feel himself an impostor, and Dot the result of some iniquitous conspiracy—that the child was not in the least like either of her parents, and put her handkerchief over her eyes. Arabella, a tall womanly girl of her age, shook her cousin's hand coldly; looked at her from head to foot; then, turning to her stepfather, asked him what sort of bonnets were worn in Paris?

"Bonnets? why, such as you see on Dora, of course," said the Squire, putting his arm kindly round the stranger's thin shoulders. "When Dora and I walked out on Sunday, we thought ourselves the two best-dressed people in the Changs Elysy, didn't we, Dora? Where's Kate?" ringing the bell. "I want Kate to come and give a kiss to her Paris cousin."

And then the door opened, and whatever brightness, whatever love Dora Fane's life was destined to know, came in.

Katharine was at this time a fine-grown handsome child of eight, nearly as tall as Dora, more than her equal in weight, and with a baby's innocence upon her beautiful mouth and in her eyes. She rushed up to the Squire, covered his down-bent face with kisses, then turned and looked steadily at her new cousin. She had been told of a girl the same age as Arabella; and to a little child of eight a girl of fifteen is a woman; so seeing a creature of her own height, but in a long silk dress and with an old unsmiling face, she shrank back, and caught tight hold of her stepfather's hand.

"Why—what a dot!" she cried; honestly, but not in a complimentary voice.

"Kate," said the Squire, gravely, "this child has neither father nor mother, nor friend save us. Will you love her?"

Katharine stood irresolute for a second; then the forlorn new cousin tried to smile—holding out her hand, and looking frightened—and in another moment a pair of warm white arms were round her neck. "I do love you!" cried Katharine; "and I'm glad you're so small. You shall be my friend, not Bell's. Don't think you've no one to care for you, though you are such a dot—you'll have me!"

This was how from the first Dora came to be called "Dot;" and this, as I have said, was the beginning of the solitary affection destined ever to shine upon the little creature's life.

In a week Kate had made the Squire give Dot a garden of her own, and a fishing-rod, and a setter pup; possessions, the child thought, to raise any human creature to the highest pinnacle of happiness. In a week the pink Paris bonnet and white parasol were uncereemoniously appropriated by Arabella, the beautiful silk dress confiscated by Mrs. Hilliard's orders; and the little work-girl of the Faubourg Saint Marceau, with bitterest disappointment, had begun to realise what kind of life this was to which her fate had brought her.

She hated it with a hate that every year of her life only tended to strengthen. Not alone the city habits of her childhood, but her naturally weak and fragile organization, withheld her from ever entering with pleasure upon the hardy out-of-door life of little Kate and the Squire. She could not learn to ride; she hated fishing, got sick and tired before she had

walked through half a turnip-field. All the excitement, all the healthy animal enjoyment of country life was, perforce, a sealed book to her; and as nearly the whole of Kate's afternoons, winter and summer, were spent outside the house, long and dreary were the hours in which Dora had to sit at her needle by herself and dream of the old life—sweet in spite of its hard work and privations—from which she had been taken. She never, from the day on which she entered the Squire's house until she finally left it in white silk and orange blossoms, had one act of positive unkindness to complain of. Mrs. Hilliard, from the first, looked upon the unexpected discovery of her pauper niece as "her cross," and treated the girl always with outward consideration, yet with a smothered kind of meek malignity that Dot was quite sharp enough to feel and return with compound interest. The eldest Miss Fane simply ignored her. "I never knew my poor aunt Theodosia," she would say, "and of course I cannot be expected to feel much interest in her daughter. It was very good of dear papa to act as he did; and I'm sure I hope, in time, poor Dora will settle respectably. It will be no advantage to Kate, having a girl of her disposition for a companion in the house as she grows up." And so, between the mother and daughter, Dora in these first years came to occupy a place higher than the lady's maid, certainly, because she dined at table, but more fatally dull, more bereft of anything like healthy human interest in life than that of the lowest servant in the Squire's household.

These were the days of her early flirtation with Steven—these were the days of young Hoskins, the surgeon, and of Mr. Smith, the curate. Detesting the

country, detesting her life at home, shut out by natural incapacity from study of anything deeper than the fashion-books, what was Dot, now eighteen years of age, to do but make up little bits of furtive finery in her own room, and try their effects on the different young men of the neighbourhood whenever she had a chance of meeting them in her walks? Arabella Fane, on the eve of marrying old General Dering's three thousand a year, solemnly warned the girl once about the growing and deplorable frivolity of her character; and Dot's retort established for life the dislike that had only smouldered hitherto between herself and her cousin. "I don't pretend to be anything but frivolous," she said. "I have, as you say, no interests, no serious occupations; and then, Arabella, you know, you have given me no opportunity of meeting rich old generals! If I had had the chance—va! do you think I would not have sacrificed inclination to principle just as readily as you, my cousin?"

She had no chance of meeting rich old generals; and somehow, in spite of the Squire's declared intention of giving her a thousand pounds on her wedding-day, none of the young men in the neighbourhood seemed destined to do more than flirt with Dora. Steven Lawrence ran away to California; Mr. Smith went over to Rome; young Hoskins got into a dispensary practice and married his cousin at Dorking; and Dora Fane was Dora Fane still. She grew up, as much as she was destined ever to grow: began to feel old, began to look old: and still no prospect dawned of her leaving her prison-house, as in her heart she always called the Dene. Then came Katharine's eighteenth birthday, her introduction into the world, her brilliant first season

in London; finally, her engagement to Lord Petres, and all poor Dora's colourless, hopeless life was changed.

"If people want to be civil to me, they shall be civil to Dot," Katharine would say, stoutly. "If Bella wants me to stay with her, she shall ask Dot too. We have forgotten too long, I think, all of us, that the poor little thing may have a few vanities, a few desires for amusement in life, like ourselves!"

And Mrs. Dering, too good a woman to be uncharitable when the wishes of an embryo peeress were concerned, had not only invited Dora to her house, but in a certain cold and duty-like fashion had done what she could towards assisting the first start of her penniless cousin in the world of London. A present of three silk dresses, in whatever colour the penniless cousin chose, but not costing more than six shillings and sixpence a yard; an introduction to the least valuable of her own partners: and a set of garnet ornaments: with all these benefactions (in addition to the attic up among the servants in Hertford Street) had Mrs. Dering loaded Dora; bearing, as she said, no malice respecting things past, in her heart.

"And so, whatever the future brings, Kate," she would reflect, "we shall always have the satisfaction of knowing that we have performed our duty. Principles, right feeling, no human creature can instil into another; but as much as it is permitted us to do, our family has done for Dora. Now, if we could only help her into making a suitable marriage!"

Which remark brings me back, with nice precision, to the present point of my story. To render Dora Fane's character intelligible, I have been forced, thus



far, to digress. All that concerns her for the future will be written on the same blotted page that bears the record of poor Steven's life!

## CHAPTER XVI.

The Squire becomes sharp-sighted.

"YES, these things bring history home to ourselves," said Mrs. Hilliard, shutting up her third volume. "I realize as I never did before, what the poor dear French noblesse must have gone through—their property confiscated, not knowing from day to day whether their heads were safe on their shoulders, and with morality, religion, the very days of the week, you may say, turned upside down by paganism and the republic . . . just as England is being turned upside down by these strikes and monster meetings and democratic opinions now! You may laugh, Katharine, but it is so; and having the lower classes to one's table *is* a tremendous stride—a tremendous stride," repeated Mrs. Hilliard, with more energy than correctness of metaphor, "against every principle in which one was reared. To dance at a ball with tenantry, or even the men-servants, is nothing—Dossy and I used to do it (in high dresses, of course), every Christmas, in my father's house; but dinner—a man of this Steven Lawrence's condition to dinner!"

Too really weak in health for any active employment in life, and with a mental digestion too torpid, or too vitiated, for the assimilation of any robust nourishment, Mrs. Hilliard consumed the ordinary three volume novel to a simply incalculable extent. "Passed her life in the pursuit of literature," she was accustomed

to say of herself. And her ideas—if I may call them ideas—were apt to take whatever feeble colouring they possessed from the tone of the nine hundred pages which her fingers had been turning over between breakfast and dinner. The hero and heroine of to-day, happening to have lost their heads on the scaffold in '92, poor Mrs. Hilliard was all in a flutter of indignant agitation at the idea of this *sans culotte*—this son of the people, Steven Lawrence—being asked to dine at her table. She had put a quantity of rich old lace about her handsome shoulders, had braided her soft hair plainly from her forehead—as the dear Marquise de Videcœur, the heroine's mother, did on the morning when her ruffianly executioners bore her to the scaffold—and now sat on her luxurious invalid sofa before the fire, waiting for her six o'clock dinner with quiet resignation, and feeling how like one of the beautiful martyred patricians of the Revolution she must look.

Katharine came from the open window where she had been standing, a book in her hand, but her eyes fixed in reality upon the distant road which led from Ashcot to the Dene, and knelt down by her mother's side. "Dear mamma," kissing Mrs. Hilliard's delicate hand, "how romantic you always insist upon being about everything! Steven Lawrence is going to dine here, and talk to papa about mangels and second crops, and the injustice of dissenters paying church rates, and you build up a whole revolutionary romance—the guillotine in full force on the necks of dukes and duchesses, and Steven Lawrence for their headsman—on the spot! Confess, mamma, you have been reading some story to-day about the French Revolution? Now, I know you have!"

"Katharine," said Mrs. Hilliard, giving her third volume a little unseen push beneath the sofa cushion, "when I was a girl it was the fashion to store young women's minds—to *store* them, Kate—with sound fixed ideas on all subjects; moral, religious, and political. There is no need of the flimsy literature of the day to rub up my memory in history. I know the French Revolution as well as my catechism: Robespierre, Danton, the Marquise de Videcœur—no, I'm not sure whether she *was* historical, but at all events, Kate, I know perfectly well what I am talking of."

"Of course you do, dear mamma, as far as history goes; only, why apply it all to Steven Lawrence? He is very humble, poor fellow—we saw a little of him in London, you know—does not in the least try to set himself above what he is, and . . . oh, mamma!" cried Katharine, "be nice to him, as you, and you only, can be when you choose!"

"And why, Katharine, pray?" for her recollections of the French Revolution were not so vivid as to have dislodged from Mrs. Hilliard's mind the story of modern English life she read yesterday, in which a simple young country lady had married, then murdered her head-gardener. "Why are *you* so anxious about the reception this Steven Lawrence is to receive?"

"In the first place, because he is to be our guest, mamma. In the second, because—well, because he will be, ever so little, perhaps, out of his place."

"Anything more, Kate?"

"No, that is—mother!" cried Katharine, suddenly, looking up into Mrs. Hilliard's rose-and-white foolish face: "I wonder whether I can trust you with a secret of mine?"

Mrs. Hilliard raised one white hand to her forehead. "Please go on, Katharine. I *believe* I can bear anything. Tell me all—and quick!" said the poor lady, falling back upon one of the favourite phrases of her heroines: "Anything but suspense!"

"Oh, don't expect too much, mamma. It's all very silly, I believe—an idea Bella and I have taken up; but we think . . . well, we think Steven Lawrence may have intentions about Dot, and that, perhaps, everything considered, we ought to try to help matters on."

"Intentions! about Dot!" cried Mrs. Hilliard, opening her eyes wide in a moment. "What! of marrying her? Oh, dear me! and her grandfather a Vereker, and her birth equal to yours and Bella's!—it must be, of course, for we are all married brothers and sisters—no, I don't mean that—but you have told me so suddenly, Kate, my mind is quite upset. However, I'll not go in to dinner! *That* humiliation, at least, it is in my power to save myself. My sister's orphan girl—oh, Dossy, Dossy!"

"Mamma," said Katharine, not without impatience, "if Dossy—if my aunt Theodosia—were alive, I don't think she would be disgraced by seeing Dot married to a man like Steven Lawrence. Dot is not quite so young as she once was, and—well, I don't mind saying it between you and me—poor little Dot has not had many offers of marriage, and I don't think has enough resources in herself to be happy as a single woman. If Mr. Lawrence really should care for her, mamma, I think you will be acting very unwisely, indeed, to discourage him."

"I discourage him!" cried Mrs. Hilliard. "Oh, Kate, how like Mr. Hilliard you are when you argue, what different, what generous tempers I was accustomed to once! *I* discourage Dora's suitors, when for fifteen years I have worn myself out with the poor girl's infirmities and—and the efforts I have made to be a mother to her! No man with a spark of delicate feeling," said Mrs. Hilliard, with tears rising in her meek blue eyes, "no man with the faintest delicacy or consideration for his wife's happiness would have acted as Mr. Hilliard did in first bringing her here! But, of course, when a wife has once made such sacrifices as I did for her husband—and a second husband, too! he will never know where to stop in his demands. I don't suppose another woman in this county would have behaved as I did when Mr. Hilliard first brought Dora from Paris. A pink silk bonnet and white parasol—of course, you are too young to remember—and the religious principles of a Hottentot, to associate with my Richard's children!"

"Dear mamma, what harm did she do us?" said Katharine; too much accustomed to her mother's peculiar modes of logic to attempt to argue. "From the time she entered the house till now Dot seems to me to have been simply and entirely negative. A poor little creature, not very much pleasure, perhaps, to herself or to any one else, but harmless, thoroughly."

"Of course, Kate. That is just what Mr. Hilliard says. It's very easy for those who are in strong health, and who spend their lives out of doors, to use such words as 'harmless' and 'negative.' To an invalid nothing can be negative. If people are not sympathetic to me they are positively repulsive; and Dora

is not sympathetic. Dora is anything but sympathetic, Kate, as you know. I detest frivolity."

"I know that as a rule all the people you like are worthy of being liked," replied Katharine, diplomatically, "and this makes me feel you will be pleased with Steven Lawrence. He is bright and simple-hearted, mamma; quite diffident of himself, and full of fine natural good feeling; so putting aside all this about Dot—which of course is mere foolish talk of mine—you *will* be gracious to the poor fellow when he comes, won't you?"

"Have you ever known me anything but gracious to persons of a lower rank to our own, Katharine?" said Mrs. Hilliard, reverting once more to the tone of the Marquise de Videcœur. "It may give me pain, infinite pain, to feel that Mr. Hilliard should have placed me in such a false position, but I shall treat the young man himself precisely as I would treat Lord Haverstock at my own table. Noblesse oblige, Kate!"

So when, a quarter of an hour later, Steven Lawrence entered, he received a softly courteous greeting, a kindly smile from Katharine's mother that almost made him as much her slave as he already was her daughter's! The excessive feminine sweetness of the elder lady's face; her weakness, her pallor, her slow, languid voice, her white languid hands, all redoubled in Steven's heart the sense that Katharine Fane had newly taught him of perfect refinement, of perfect womanly grace. As a boy he remembered having occasional glimpses of the "Squire's lady," fair and languid-voiced and helpless, then as now; and the thought of all the patient suffering which this gentle

being must have passed through since, appealed to him as the thought of pain and weakness in others is wont to appeal to men of unbroken health and active out-of-door habits themselves. With the Squire talking to him, and Dot going through pretty attitudes with the paroquet by the window (for his benefit); nay, with Katharine herself at his side, he could not keep his attention from the invalid's fragile face; and when dinner was announced, quite unconscious of what was, or was not, etiquette for a man in his position to do, walked quickly to her sofa, and stooping down, held out his arm for her hand to rest upon as she rose.

"That is right, Lawrence," said the Squire. "Do you take in Mrs. Hilliard, and Dora, you must be content with me. I'm sorry for you, Kate," as Katharine, her face radiant at seeing her mother's gracious reception of Steven, put her hand under his other arm; "but even Kate Fane must come down from her pedestal sometimes! If I had thought of it I might have asked the handsome young rector for you, though—poor Kate!"

"I'm very glad you did not, papa," said Katharine. "We are a much pleasanter party by ourselves, in my opinion!" And Steven's heart caught her answer, and thrilled with a perfectly unwarrantable and ridiculous sense of relief! He had been lying awake half the night thinking, in jealous misery, of the handsome rector, and of how Katharine had smiled on him as they walked together out of church.

"You will find us all very much changed, Mr. Lawrence," said Mrs. Hilliard, as leaning on Steven's arm, she walked slowly with him to the dining-room.

"The children grown into women, the Squire and I, alas! into old people."

"Old?" said Steven, looking down at her with his frank blue eyes. "That's not a word I should have thought of in connection with you. I may be stupid, but it seems to me, madam, yours is a face that never could grow old."

Here he stopped; afraid he had been overbold; and Mrs. Hilliard remembered Ninon de l'Enclos, for whose smiles a third generation duelled when she was sixty, and let her soft white hand rest closer on the young man's arm.

She bade him sit beside her at table: Katharine opposite to him; and speedily forgetting the wounded pride of Videcœur in the flattered vanity of Ninon, chattered in her prettiest, most sentimental strain (a strain that thirty years before had, doubtless, suited a girlish peach-blossom face well enough) during the whole of dinner. "We were to have talked over parish matters, I believe, Lawrence," said Mr. Hilliard, when the dessert was put upon the table, and they had moved away into the bay window; for in spring-time the dining-room was the pleasantest evening-room at the Dene, and the ladies always stayed there while the Squire drank his coffee after dinner; "but I have not been able to get in a word with you yet. How do you find the farm looking? not quite as it used in the old days, I suppose."

"The farm," answered Steven, "is looking as any farm must look upon which nothing has been put, and out of which all has been taken during more than three years. The message that Miss Dora wrote to me



from you was a timely one, sir. The farm wanted my presence, and no mistake."

"Well, I had no reason to think any positive ill of Dawes," said the Squire; "still, when I saw the same field sowed with wheat for three successive years——"

"Dawes is a scoundrel," said Steven, quietly. "The land may have been over-cropped and under-manured through ignorance—*may*, I say; though I don't much believe in want of design even there. In actual hard cash the man has been robbing us for years. He robbed my uncle in his lifetime, young Josh in his, and me since young Josh's death."

"Oh, Mr. Lawrence, are you sure of this?" cried Katharine. "Are you sure that you are not judging him too hastily? I always think poor Dawes has such a good face!"

"And I have looked over his accounts, Miss Fane," said Steven, "and, poor scholar though I am, have proved him to be dishonest. It took me five hours to-day. I never reckoned so many figures in my life——"

"And the end of it was?" asked the Squire.

"My bidding Dawes leave the farm, and show his face there no more; him, and all belonging to him."

"What!" cried Mr. Hilliard, "you gave him warning on the spot? A harsh measure, wasn't it, Lawrence? Ashcot has been his home for years."

"I gave him no warning at all, sir," said Steven. "I turned him out, him and his sons, and all that they claimed as belonging to them, into the road. Old Barbara and I will be the only inmates of Ashcot to-night."

"And you think this right, just?" cried Katharine, indignantly. "Allowing Dawes to have been ignorant—dishonest, even—you think it right to act like this? to turn a man who till this morning was counted honest out of your house like a common thief?"

"It is my idea of right," said Steven, humbly. "The life I have led has taught me that there's never any good in shilly-shallying when you've got to deal with a blackguard. If a man wrongs me I punish him, if I can, in hot blood, and in the hour when I find him out, and when I knowingly wrong any man, I shall expect to be treated the same. This is my idea of justice, and I couldn't go from it, although I'm quite ready to confess I may be wrong."

"And what will the Daweses do?" cried the Squire, taken aback at the idea of this sort of lynch law being imported into the parish. "Upon my word, Lawrence, I think you have been over-hasty. I hope you did not mention my name, now? Dawes is a man very well spoken of in the neighbourhood."

"The better for him," said Steven, shortly; "of course I didn't mention your name, sir—the better for him that he is spoken well of. He will find work come quicker to his hand."

"And what labour do you mean to take on the farm yourself, then?"

"As little as I can get along with," answered Steven. "When I was a boy I remember that my uncle and myself, and a couple of lads, generally did the work pretty well, with extra hands of course at seed time and harvest. I don't see why more labour should be wanted now than there was ten years ago."

"Well, not of course if you mean to—"

"I mean," said Steven, as a look from Katharine made the Squire hesitate, "to plough with my own hand and reap with my own arm as my father and grandfather did before me. There's not much profit to be made by small farms at the best of times now-a-days; but, working as I shall work, Ashcot will yield me a fair living, and let me ride a good horse across country still. As much as I desire."

"Ah, you'll want one thing more, Lawrence," said the Squire, good-humouredly. "You'll want a wife—Kate, my dear, that's the fourth knob you have put in your mother's coffee—a smart little wife to keep your house in order for you. No good for a young fellow like you to talk of getting on steadily at farming or any other business without that, Lawrence."

Steven reddened, and in spite of himself his eyes sought Katharine's face.

"When I marry, sir," said he, "it will be because—because the woman I like will have me, not because the farm wants a mistress. As far as I can see, Barbara will keep house and mind the dairy for me for a good many years to come yet."

Dot had been sitting demurely in the bay-window while the others talked, looking, in her flowered summer dress and with a knot of ribbon and lace in her short hair, for all the world like a painted porcelain Marchioness (Dot always reminded you of some figure you had seen on Sèvres or Dresden). At Steven's last words she raised her big black eyes for a second to his; then, seeing that he was not looking at her or thinking of her, turned her face away towards the window, and began, under her voice, to sing the re-

frain of one of those French ballads that mean so little in fact, and yet, sung with a certain sentiment, that may be made to mean so much!

"A Sainte Blaize, à la Zuecca  
Vous étiez, vous étiez bien aise  
A Sainte Blaize!"

tapping with her small fingers on the glass as an accompaniment.

"My dear Dora!" Mrs. Hilliard interposed in her softest, most injured tone, and opening her eyes, which had been shut ever since the Squire had diverted Steven's attention from herself.

"Yes, aunt Arabella?"

"My poor head, Dora love! Singing, or rather humming, always drives me to distraction, as you know."

"Oh, I beg a thousand pardons!" cried Dot, jumping up. "Whenever I see the sun setting I feel I am out of doors, and whenever I am out of doors I feel I must sing! Who will come out? Will you, Katharine—will you, uncle Frank—when you have finished your coffee?"

The Squire was much too well broken in to his duties, somewhat too much afraid also of the effects of evening damp upon his own rheumatism, to leave the invalid alone. "Thank you, Dora my dear, I make it a rule never to stir out after dinner till the middle of the month—till it's dry enough, you know, Dot, for your poor aunt to go out with us. However, that's no reason you and Kate shouldn't take Lawrence for a walk about the place. He'll see it just as it always was, scarcely a tree altered, except perhaps the plantation beyond the rickyard. Kate, be sure you point

out the young larches to him. I should like Lawrence's opinion as to the distance Macgregor has set them apart."

Dora tripped away into the passage for her garden-hat, a coquettish Watteau-like hat with knots of blue ribbon and broad shepherdess brim; Katharine, who never studied effect (of this kind), and was perfectly indifferent to evening dews or fresh breezes, opened the French window and walked out, bare-headed, into the sunset, with Steven following her.

"My dear," said the Squire to his wife a minute or two later, as he stood looking out upon the garden, his coffee-cup in his hand, "do you know a very curious fancy has just come into my head?"

"Has it, Mr. Hilliard?"

"I shouldn't, of course, wish to hurt Dot's pride in any way, but it strikes me—well, it strikes me, Arabella, Master Lawrence is trying to pay his attentions to her. He was very anxious to turn it off, I remarked, when I joked him about getting a wife. Now what do you say?"

"What do you expect me to say, Frank?"

"Nay, my love, what do *you* think—what do you think?" said the Squire. "Of course I know you have had more experience in all these things than I have."

"What things, Mr. Hilliard?"

"Why, my dear, love and courtship, and—and all that!" cried the Squire, feeling that he had not hit upon a happy remark.

"Frank!" observed Mrs. Hilliard, opening her mild blue eyes very wide at him; "I see your attempt at sarcasm, but it does not wound me. I am past

being wounded! May I ask you to ring for Williams?"

"Sarcasm! I will not ring for Williams; you know you never sleep when you go to bed so early—sarcasm! Merciful heaven, what did I say that could be called sarcasm?" cried the Squire, all contrition and humility. "Did I ever in my life say or imagine an unkind word towards you? Now do, my poor child, be reasonable—I mean forgive me. I hadn't an idea of offending you, upon my soul I hadn't! You were very amiable to the young man at dinner, and as far as looks and manners go—"

"Mr. Hilliard," interrupted the invalid, "it's no use trying to turn it off like that. I wasn't thinking of Dot or of Steven Lawrence—who is not in the slightest degree attentive to her—but of what you said about my experience in love and courtship. If there is one man on earth who should be the last to taunt me with infidelity to my Richard's memory, that man is you."

Which led on naturally to the poor little Squire's going through one of those daily scenes of recrimination from the lips of his angel, and confessions of cruelty from his own, that were the sentimental salt of Mrs. Hilliard's life; the only excitement she ever derived, except from novels. "I believe, indeed I know, I'm a fool in these things," he said, meekly, when peace was at last restored; "but still I do think it looks like it." Katharine, for some reason, had returned to the house; and Steven and Dora were to be seen standing somewhat close together at a distant corner of the lawn. "And upon my word I should be very glad if it was so. Quite time the poor girl was comfortably settled

in a home of her own. Now I wonder, Arabella, whether Lawrence knows she will have a thousand pounds on her wedding day?"

"It would be a delicate thing for you to tell him so, Mr. Hilliard—very delicate indeed. Dora is *my* dead Theodosia's child, and Steven Lawrence a peasant."

The poor Squire bit his lips to prevent getting into further trouble, and walked up and down the room, in the noiseless tiptoe fashion long habit had taught him, until the mild blue eyes of his angel were closed in earnest.

## CHAPTER XVII.

Strephon and Phillis.

It was a bright cool evening; one of those May evenings in which spring and summer mingle so deliciously that while you welcome the coming roses you more than half regret the fickle hawthorn-scented month that is dying. The cheerful dappled sky, the blossoming orchards, the waves of fawn and pink and soft dun green in the grassfields as the light wind passed over them, made up just the kind of gentle, homely picture whose charm, like that of Gainsborough's paintings, or Cowper's verses, we can never analyse and never outlive. Even Dot, who seldom paid nature the attention of remembering whether the sun was rising or setting, summer blooming or fading, was alive to the freshness and fragrance of the "background" as she stood beside Steven on the Squire's lawn, and looked round—wondering what subject would be the best to begin upon—at the smiling country.

"How delightfully green everything is looking, Mr. Lawrence! what a relief after London! I was so glad, and to speak honestly *so* surprised, when Katharine consented to come home on Sunday."

Katharine had just found some excuse for leaving them alone together; and Steven, one of whose savage habits it was to remain silent when he had nothing to say, was standing watching the flutter of her summer dress as she re-crossed the lawn in the direction of the house. "I beg your pardon, Miss Dora," he cried, as Dot's penetrating voice recalled him to a sense of her existence. "You were saying——"

"How glad I was that I had been able to get away from town rather earlier than usual this season—thanks to Lord Petres' departure!" added Dot, maliciously. "Would you mind walking about a little? Katharine will find us just the same; but I find it too chilly to stand, and the dew is falling."

Steven walked on by her side obediently, and Dot led him to a broad grass terrace, shut away by shrubs out of sight of the house, and with a full view of Clithero Bay, unruffled now as a little inland lake, and with the smooth high tide breaking on the sandy beach, scarcely more than a stone's-throw beneath where they stood. "This is the terrace I reminded you of in my letter," said Dot. "Do you remember it? "Do you remember one Sunday evening when I was here, and saw you in your boat——"

"And came down and went out to sea with me," interrupted Steven. "I do remember it well, though I suppose I haven't thought of it for ten years or more; and how frightened we both were of being found out—I, because I knew I had been breaking the Sabbath,



and you—you, Miss Dora, because you knew what your aunt and cousin would say to you for being seen in my company."

Dot was silent for a moment; then, with a want of abashment so entire as to make Steven feel excessively abashed, and at the top of her voice, she carolled forth a stanza from the time-worn song about thorns and flowers, and the willingness of the singer to give up the hopes of years for those "bygone hours." In all the best theatrical representations of country courtship which she had seen it had been the successful custom of the heroine to enliven the prose part of the scene with verses of song, delivered in a loud voice, and with arch glances at the hero, and poor Dot really was doing her best to act a pretty Phillis to this great obtuse Strephon at her side. Katharine had cautioned her not to talk of balls and Paris and London, as she would to Mr. Clarendon Whyte, but to be simple, and, above all, natural in her conversation with Steven Lawrence; and Dot's ideas of nature and simplicity were to pay pretty compliments to the setting sun, and wear a broad straw hat trimmed with blue ribbon, and give arch glances, and sing. Was it her fault if the yeoman failed to appreciate the part that she was acting down to his level and for his benefit?

"I—I have something I want particularly to say to you," she cried at last, as Steven stood silent, and looking rather less affected than she had expected by the song; "but I hardly know how to begin it. When your cousin died, and Uncle Frank did not think things about the farm were going on as they ought, I undertook to write, because they all said you would remem-

ber me best—and then, you know, I sent you my photograph. Please tell me you didn't think it a very strange thing for me to do?"

"Now is my time!" thought Steven; for, cost him what it might, he had already fully made up his mind to set matters straight with Dora Fane. "I'd as lief be shot, as have to hurt the poor little thing's feelings, but there's no choice left me!" And then, stammering like a guilty schoolboy, and not daring to look at her, he blurted the truth out. "You sent me—it was very good of you to think of me at all, I'm sure—but you sent me your cousin's photograph, not your own! I have never had a chance to tell you this before. Of course, as soon as I saw you both together in town, I knew you had made a mistake, and that I must ask your pardon for the letter I wrote, and—and there's no harm done!" he went on, desperately, "and I hope, Miss Dora, you'll show you forgive me, by giving me your own now." All this in a breath, as if he had been saying a lesson learnt by rote; but, as you may remark, clearing himself most explicitly, and not abating a syllable from the disagreeable or unflattering part of his explanation.

Dora Fane gave one quick upward look at his face. Something she saw there—his earnestness, perhaps, or his confusion—amused her; and she had to bite her lip hard to repress a smile. "Katharine's picture! Now, *could* I really have made such a ridiculous mistake? At all events, you were the gainer, Mr. Lawrence. Kate makes such a beautiful photograph, doesn't she? and I really can't see why you should talk about asking any one's forgiveness. Keep dear Kate's picture, by all means, as you have been lucky enough to get it, and

I'll give you one of my own too, with pleasure. Do you like full-lengths or vignettes best?"

"And there are people who say women are not generous!" thought Steven. Could a man have got over a wound to his vanity so quickly, however indifferent he might have been to the woman who gave it? "Whatever you like to give me, I shall be grateful for, Miss Dora. The picture that is the best likeness of you would please me most."

"Well, for the matter of that, I never think these very small photographs have much real likeness in them," said Dot, impartially. "Now Kate and I, little as you would think it, are often taken for each other in our cartes de visite. *Is* it possible that you have been mistaken after all? Was the photograph a vignette, or what? You couldn't show it to me, of course?"

"Oh yes, I could," answered Steven, in his simplicity, and taking the locket from his waistcoat pocket. "Can you open it?—so. A wonderfully good likeness I call that, as far as I can judge."

Dora looked at the photograph; confessed at once to her stupidity; admired the setting of the locket—had no idea they sold such pretty things in barbarous countries like Mexico—and then returned it quietly into Steven's hands. "If Lord Petres was a jealous man, I might make nice mischief, by telling him that you wear Katharine's photograph, mightn't I?" she cried, with another sidelong glance at Steven's face, to assure herself that the shot told.

"I think not, Miss Dora," he answered; "Lord Petres could no more mind my possessing Miss Fane's picture, than the Emperor of France could mind my

wearing one of the Empress, if I had the folly to choose to do so."

"No, of course, Lord Petres would not mind. I said *if* Lord Petres was jealous, he might not like it. But Lord Petres is not jealous—very fortunately for him," added Dot, with emphasis, "Lord Petres is not jealous."

"Well, no, I should say not," said poor Steven. "What has a man like Lord Petres to be jealous of? He has fortune, birth—"

"And Katharine Fane for his future wife!" cried Dot, as Steven hesitated. "Mr. Lawrence, is not my cousin beautiful?"

"Ay," said Steven, "that indeed she is, and not beautiful only."

"No; Katharine has something in her voice and manner that makes every one love her. I'm fonder of her than of any one else in the world. She has always been my friend from the first day they brought me here. Oh! it makes me shudder, actually shudder," cried Dot, "when I think of what my life will be after Katharine goes."

"Goes!" exclaimed Steven, blankly. "Goes! but when will that be?"

"Why, when she marries, to be sure," said Dot. "It is impossible that the wedding can be delayed later than this autumn. They have been engaged—let me see—nearly a year and a half already, and there has always been something, hitherto, to delay the marriage. At first Katharine said she was too young; then Lord Petres was too ill; then Lord Petres' French cook gave warning; then Lord Petres' French cook would stay. But now it really is coming off, I believe. It will be

a charming marriage for dear Kate, you know. Lord Petres has I can't say how many thousands a year, and is a very nice little man, and Katharine is *so* attached to him, and then he is a Catholic, and everything."

"And is Miss Fane a Catholic?" asked Steven, feeling more hopelessly far from Katharine at every word Dot uttered, "I thought she was at church with you and the Squire yesterday?"

"Oh yes! she goes to the church of England, and nominally belongs to it still," said Dot; "but everybody knows where Kate's heart is—indeed she makes no secret of her intention of returning openly to the church after her marriage. We are all Catholics by birth, you know, only my aunt when she married Mr. Hilliard, went over, from indolence I believe, to his way of thinking, and so Kate and Arabella were brought up to be Protestants. Religion was not a subject Arabella troubled her head about, but Kate, young as she was, never in heart went away from the old faith. You know our rector—no? Well, nothing but his being so high—oh, ultra, ultra high!" cried Dot, stretching up her small hand as if to represent the very pinnacles of ritualism, "would make Kate tolerate him as she does."

"And you, Miss Dora?" said Steven, "are you a Catholic or a Protestant, or half one and half the other, like your cousin?"

"I? oh, Mr. Lawrence!" and Dot shook her head and looked solemn, "I'm a firm Protestant; indeed, if I have a leaning it is altogether the other way. I like to have the word preached to me without adornment. No incense, no vestments, no grand church shows for

me! My religion is plain and humble, as my position in life must be."

She spoke with a ring of mournfulness in her voice; and Steven, whose upright soul never suspected man or woman of insincerity, felt his sympathies increase towards her. Could this be the woman of whom Lord Petres had said that she would be about as good a companion for a man as a gilt butterfly? the frivolous woman with expensive tastes, who in London had had Mr. Clarendon Whyte for her intimate companion, and gone into raptures over Mademoiselle Fleuri's last new wig? "If you like a plain religion you should come to our chapel some Sunday," he remarked; and Dora detected a warmer tone in his voice. "You will hear the word preached without adornment of any kind there. But I suppose," added Steven doubtfully, thinking less perhaps of Dora Fane's individual principles than of the class she represented; "I suppose you would hold it altogether beneath you to go inside a dissenting meeting-house?"

"If I followed my own inclinations I would go there every Sunday of my life," said Dot, "I am weary of all the intoning, and bowing, and vain observances we get at the parish church, but of course, placed as I am, I have to consider others. Really I don't think Katharine would ever forgive me if she knew I had been to Shiloh. Once, years and years ago, I remember I went there to evening service, and I believe I was in disgrace for six months afterwards at least?"

"I remember," said Steven, "it was before I went to America. You came in with Hoskins, who was

apprenticed at that time, Miss Dora, to old Blake at Stourmouth."

The colour rose into Dot's face at the maladroitness; but the light had faded too much for Steven to notice it. "In those days," said she, "we used to be Dora and Steven to each other! I don't know, as old friends, why we should be so formal in our way of speaking now?"

"In those days we were children, or little more," remarked Steven promptly. "In those days I was ignorant of the difference between your station and mine."

"Well, I hoped—I mean I thought—from your letter you would show the same happy ignorance still!" said Dot. "Station! oh, I have heard about rank and station till I am sick of the very thought of them. But of course it shall be as you like!" She stopped, and sighed.

Thoroughly honest though Steven was, it was not to be expected that he would repulse an offer of friendship so humbly, so hesitatingly tendered, or remind Dora, a second time, that his letter had been written, in truth, to Katharine, not to her! Perhaps, if I must confess all his weakness, the prospect of being on terms of equality with Katharine's cousin was not displeasing to him; perhaps in his inmost thoughts it seemed to him that friendship with Dora might bridge over, by ever so little, the gulf which divided him from Lord Petres' future wife!

"You are all goodness to me, Miss Dora, and nothing would flatter me more than to hear you call me by my name as you used, only——"

——“Only, remember you will have to call me by mine in return.”

“I . . . really, I don't think I could,” said Steven shyly. “You must remember I haven't spoken to a lady for these ten years. I don't think I could ever bring myself to commit such a boldness.”

“Oh yes, I think you could when you get a little less afraid of me!” cried Dot, with one of her shrill laughs. “I, at all events, shall begin speaking to you at once as I used to speak in the days when we were not too old to be natural!”

And she was as good as her word. When Miss Fane rejoined them, some minutes later, the first sound she heard was Steven's name, proceeding, in the most perfectly matter-of-course tone imaginable, from Dot's lips. And Katharine's heart revolted from the sound! Her dream—a minute ago she would have told herself, her desire—had been that Steven and Dora should marry. To this end she had forgiven him his fatal error when he first met her in Hertford Street; to this end had made the Squire invite him to dinner; to this end had schooled Dora as to the wickedness of regretting a man like Clarendon Whyte, and risking the loss of an affection sterling and true as Steven's. Yet now, so perverse, so inexplicably crooked is human nature, now that her ears assured her an explanation had taken place between them; that if they were not lovers, they were certainly walking in the right road to become so, a pang sharper than she had suffered in her whole life (a life, remember, which had never yet known love or jealousy), contracted her heart. She remembered Steven's supplicating voice when she parted from him last; remembered the pressure of his



hand; remembered the expression of his face as he stood and watched their carriage drive away from the Opera House; remembered how, when she had been on her knees that night, the thought of him had come between her and heaven, and how she had prayed that his madness might pass away, and that poor little Dora might become his wife. Well, the prayer that had seemed so presumptuous then was answered: that was all! Three days later, and her prayer was answered; and Steven, just as inconstant as if he had been civilized for years, was paying his suit to Dora already. It was right, very right. The poor yeoman had been brought to see the folly of his love, and had renounced it—lightly as men do renounce their love—and she would be spared the indignity of having to repulse him anew. She had managed the whole affair beautifully; and Dot should never know the humiliation to which she had been forced to stoop for her sake. It was right, very right; and coming to her cousin's side, she put her hand with a kindly little pressure upon her shoulder. Then, Dot's unceasing voice masking the silence of her companions, they all three walked slowly back along the terrace.

Dora accompanied Steven Lawrence into the house to say good-night to the Squire and Mrs. Hilliard, but Katharine just at this minute managed to disappear from the scene, and when Steven came out again to start for his homeward walk, he felt that, either by intention or through indifference, which was worse, she had avoided him. The fresh spring evening had darkened into a still, almost sultry, night; and when he had got about half way along the Squire's avenue,

Steven bethought himself that it would be pleasanter to return home, smoking his pipe and dreaming of Miss Fane, by the cool seashore, than along the dusty road. A flight of steps led down from the terrace to the beach, he remembered, just at the spot where Dora had sung to him about "bygone hours;" and retracing his steps he made his way past the house, thence by the upper lawn and through the shrubberies to the eastern end of the terrace: the end from whence, in daylight, the low white walls of Ashcot could be seen across the blue sweep of Clithero Bay. The night was moonless, but there was sufficient glimmering twilight left to discern objects at ten or fifteen yards distant; and as Steven was walking quickly on, he caught sight of a figure leaning against the terrace-wall, just at the head of the steps by which he had to pass. It was Katharine: her white dress fluttering through the gloom, the outline of her head and throat showing delicately clear against the vapoury background of grey sea and sky. Steven made his way on noiselessly across the close-shorn turf, and in another moment was at her side. "Miss Katharine," said he, under his breath, "won't you say good-night to m before I go?"

She turned round to him with a half-frightened cry: "Mr. Lawrence, how you startled me! Was it in this ghostly fashion you used to steal down upon the bears and panthers, sir? I never thought any one would miss me. I only came away because—"

"Because?" asked Steven, as she hesitated.

"Oh, because I detest having to go in to hot rooms and candle-light at this time of the year. I like to stand here alone when it is dark like this, and hear, or fancy I hear, the tide turn. It had just ebbed now.

Stay silent for a while, and see if you can't detect a farther-off sound in each fall of the waves."

Steven remained silent as she bade him, not listening to the waves, or to any other sound in the universe, but with his eyes fixed intently upon the exquisite, shadowed face at his side. After a few minutes, Katharine looked up to him again.

"Now, wasn't there a difference. Could you not distinctly tell that the last wave was farther away from us than the one before?"

"I was not thinking of the waves at all," answered Steven. "I never heard whether they rose or fell."

"Mr. Lawrence, are you speaking in earnest?"

"Quite in earnest, Miss Fane. Don't you remember the bond I am under to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth, to you?"

"Oh, but I think that bond is cancelled!" cried Katharine. "The moment we began to put it into practice, I found that listening to truth was much less agreeable than I had expected, and got cross with you: do you recollect?"

"I recollect," said Steven; "but I don't think you need be angry with me for telling the truth now. I never heard the break of the waves, just as I never heard the voices of the singing people at the theatre, because I was with you, and—"

"Ah, Mr. Lawrence, please—please—don't pay me a compliment!" interrupted Katharine, shrinking a little away, and in her heart retracting every harsh thing she had thought of Steven during the last half hour. "If you knew how tired I am of pretty complimentary speeches, I am sure you would never make me any again as long as you live."

"I will always do exactly as you bid me at the moment," said Steven with humility; if telling the truth is making a pretty complimentary speech, of course I will tell the truth no more."

"That's right. You know I am looking forward to seeing you very often at our house, and I want you, really and truly, to look upon me as a friend. There can be no pretty speeches or compliments between people who are friends in earnest, can there?"

Steven said not a word; and Katharine Fane felt more strangely, more humiliatingly embarrassed than she had ever felt in her life before by his silence.

"I was very glad to see you and mamma get on so well," she began desperately, after two or three minutes' dead pause; "and Dora, too—you and Dora must have so much to say to each other after all these years. I—I hope we shall see you again before very long."

"As soon as you tell me to come, I will come," answered Steven, with his accustomed bluntness.

"Well, Wednesday then, or to-morrow if you will; you will be quite sure to find Dora and poor mamma at home, whenever you call—Listen! can that really be ten o'clock that is striking? Oh, Mr. Lawrence, I think I must go in now," and she took a step or two in the direction of the house. "It is getting so dark and——"

"And you *will* wish me good night, Miss Fane, will you not?"

"Why, of course, I will. Good night."

She held out her hand; but Steven, not knowing that she had offered it, turned shortly away; the sweet "Good night" making him only too contented—poor

wretch! and Katharine stood and watched his tall figure until it was lost from sight among the purple shadows on the beach.

When she got back to the house the first person she saw was Dora, candle in hand, on the staircase. "What, Kate!" cried Dot, looking round, "I thought you had 'gone to bed an hour ago—and how white you are!" scrutinising her narrowly. "Did you see Steven Lawrence as he went away?"

"I saw Mr. Lawrence for a moment, Dot."

"And what did he tell you?"

"Tell me? Nothing in particular. I only saw him for a moment," and Katharine hesitated.

"Oh, I didn't know," cried Dot, carelessly; "I thought, perhaps, he might have told you of our conversation. I explained to him the mistake about the photograph, and it appears he knew it was yours from the first—that's all. We quite understand each other now, Kate."

"I suspected as much when I heard you calling him 'Steven,'" said Katharine, quietly. "Ah, Dot, I wonder how soon this first act of the play will be over? I wonder how soon I shall have to offer you good wishes in earnest?"

" 'A Sainte Blaize, à la Zuecca,' "

sang Dot;

" 'Dans les prés fleuris cueillir la verveine.

. . . Mais de vous en souvenir

Prendrez vous la peine? "

Kate," peeping down through the banisters, and looking more weirdly like a painted porcelain figure than ever, "how glad I am I took your advice about Steven!

It *does* so set one's conscience at rest, to be perfectly honest and straightforward, doesn't it?"

"I don't think I know, Dot. I'm not quite sure whether I have a conscience or not," answered Katharine, modestly.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### The Time of Roses.

IN a fortnight's time Steven Lawrence, first on one excuse then another, had become an almost daily visitor at the Dene. The Squire, retaining his first opinion as to real object of Steven's visits, was always ready to greet him with friendly heartiness; and at the end of three days managed to let him know the amount of Dot's marriage portion. Mrs. Hilliard, who, since the French Revolution, had passed through three or four new phases of romantic hallucination, seemed still disposed to make the yeoman's picturesque person a peg on which to hang the fabric of harmless dreams. Dora Fane treated him with the sisterly familiarity which from the first she had contrived to establish between them; a familiarity compromising herself in nothing, thought Dot; but which, at the first inevitable moment of rebound—the first moment when Kate's caprice should have past—might ripen just into whatever feeling she herself chose. And Katharine? For the first time in her life Katherine felt that she was being drawn along by an influence stronger far than coquetry or love of conquest; an influence alien altogether to her own vanity; sweet as the young June sun above her head, and irresistible as it was sweet.

A dream, a dream! she would say to herself a dozen times a day. Steven Lawrence in his heart cared,

must care, for Dot, and would one day marry her, as surely as she cared for, and would marry Lord Petres. If she looked forward to his coming it was for Dot's sake; if she found a new, bright pleasure in walking beside him in this glad summer weather, it was merely because Steven himself was new and bright; unlike all the other human beings of her experience. "A beautiful savage," she had called him, extenuating his misdeeds to her conscience on that first evening of their meeting in London; "a creature outside the pale of all conventionalities whatsoever, and to be treated like no other man:" and in this same spirit—so she strove to assure herself—she still regarded him. Dot was fortunate, very. The happiest hour, she thought, in her own life would be that in which she would see her cousin (the foolish prejudices of rank laid aside) become the legitimate owner of a heart simple and strong as Steven's. And in the meantime—in the meantime the fields were blossoming and the thrushes singing, and Steven's face and voice and mute adoration for ever present at her side!

Not one directly disloyal feeling had, as yet, stirred in Katharine Fane's breast. To have refrained from encouraging Steven simply because she suspected him of liking her a little too well for his own peace, had been to run counter to every old instinct, every old habit of her nature. A great many men besides this one had professed to be in despair about her during the last three years; and she had smiled at first upon them all, then frowned—when their despair became inconveniently definite—then smiled again; and never seen broken hearts or serious ruin of any sort ensue from her cruelty. It would be just the same now

Steven Lawrence had come home from America prepared to love and marry Dora Fane; and of course, but for the foolish mistake of the photograph, the love-story would have gone on in its appointed course; most likely have arrived at its last stage by this time. That it would all come right in the end there could be no doubt. It was not as forward, perhaps, as she had thought on that first evening when Steven dined at the Dene; but Dot for certain was growing to like him; never laughed when he was absent at his savage ways and want of polish, or of kid gloves; never mentioned Mr. Clarendon Whyte now. In another fortnight, unless east wind returned, Lord Petres was coming over from Paris to visit them; probably to settle upon the time of their marriage; and then, thought Katharine, all this pleasant pastoral interlude, of which Steven was the hero, would be over. She was not quite sure that when the time came she would be able to resign the poor fellow's worship without some pangs of regret: not quite sure that her own life would not seem somewhat blank on the day when she would be obliged, distinctly and for ever, to look upon him coldly. That she could be cutting him off from all his old peace; that she could be ruining his life, his prospects, his character, for her selfish pastime; Katharine Fane no more dreamed than a child who grasps a butterfly and laughs with delight at the coloured dust it leaves upon its fingers, dreams of the butterfly's real position in the game.

Perhaps a woman whose experience in the matter of love has been confined to London drawing-rooms may be excused, on the score of ignorance, for somewhat underrating mens capabilities for sentimental suffering.



The early roses had blown and fallen; the varied tints of hedge-row and coppice were changing fast into the deep-hued monotone of midsummer; and at length the day came when Lord Petres was to arrive at the Dene. It was such weather as makes you feel it a sin to stay half an hour together in the house; warm, unclouded weather, with cool winds stirring from the west, with freshness of recent rains making the green world sweet; and Katharine, who had been running restlessly about her flower-garden all the morning, declared her intention, immediately after lunch, of paying a round of visits to her poor people that afternoon.

"My dear Kate, *do* you forget who is coming?" cried Mrs. Dering, who had arrived the night before on a three days' visit to her mother. "You are so sunburnt already, and—just suppose Lord Petres should be here before you are back!"

"He would not die of despair, I hope," said Katharine, putting on her hat; "I haven't visited my people for more than a week, and to-morrow I must stay at home—at least, I suppose so—and the next day as well. Good-bye, Arabella. Give my love to Lord Petres, if you see him before I do!" And ten minutes later she was singing as she walked along through the green corn-fields: wondering whether it was the thought of seeing her lover that made her heart so light, then—with a sigh, and breaking down abruptly in her song—whether next June, whether any June, would ever be as full of sweetness to her as this that had newly fled.

Miss Fane's "people" were scattered far and wide over the straggling parish of Clithero, and by the time

all her visits were paid the sun was already in the west. Once upon a time, in the true spirit of sectarianism, Katharine had laid it down as an axiom that she would never enter the cottage of a dissenter. Only church-people ought to be relieved at all, she said sternly (in theory); and among church-people only those who were members of the church *in earnest*. But somehow this rule of hers did not wear; somehow, when she got abroad among the poor, poverty, sickness, a brood of tiny children—want, weakness, pain, and not orthodoxy—were the voices which ever cried aloud to this staunch churchwoman's heart. "It's very easy at home to talk of those who ought to be helped!" she said, when the Squire teased her once about the falling off of her principles, and the especially latitudinarian character of a family of her dearest protégés; "but when you see people face to face, and they are sick and hungry, and miserable, how can you remember religion—I mean difference of religion? As soon as Jim Neele has got a boat again, and when the children are up from the fever, I'll begin to talk to them seriously about never coming to church."

So to-day, after duly visiting all her church-people, the cottage which Katharine kept for the last, and at which she knew her visit from predilection would be the longest, was that of this very Jim Neele; a fisherman of lax theological tenets—Shilohite rather than churchman, when he remembered to go to any place of worship at all—with a poor, clean, over-worked wife and six children, all miraculously near to each other in size, and the oftenest-washed, freshest-cheeked little brood to be seen in the parish.

Poor Mrs. Neele, as usual, was looking utterly

children-worn and meek and hollow-eyed; with her arms up to the elbows in soap-suds, and two or three small boys and girls winding themselves tightly up in the skirts of her patched cotton gown. So, after some friendly talk about Jim and the prospects of mackerel, and Lizzie Jane's teeth; and when something from the visitor's ready purse had made the worn mother's face brighten beautifully; Katharine proposed that she should take off Dan and the baby (really the last baby but one; there was always in the Neele family a pink morsel lying asleep in the cradle, but too indefinite as yet to be taken into calculation) with her for a walk upon the waste. "Just to get them out of your way, Mrs. Neele," said Katharine, in the courteous unpatronising way that made all these people love her: rough independent fisher-people who would have tolerated no fine lady with tracts and good advice inside their doors. "Please don't look frightened," she added, "I shall take the greatest care of them, and bring them back in an hour, when you have done washing, and it's time for me to return home."

The waste was a long strip of sea-board land that ran, broken at intervals by the seamen's narrow strips of garden, from one end to the other of the parish. Land too arid to yield anything beyond coarse scant grass, musk-thistles, and sea convulvulus—just sufficient food for the donkeys and goats that browsed there; but amidst whose sandy undulations it was pleasant, on a July day, to sit and watch the tide break on the distant rocks; with the faint line of Essex coast for background, and the broad arch of summer blue above your head. A favorite resting-place of "lady's," as little Dan Neele knew; and a place where sweeties

were given to appearing miraculously on the ground beside "lady" as she sat. So shouldering Katharine's parasol in a style learnt from the coast-guardsmen, and with a great cotton sun-bonnet of his mother's nearly covering his entire figure, Dan marched on, as fast as his three-year-old legs could carry him, with Miss Fane bearing a stout baby girl of eighteen months aloft in her arms behind.

She chose a spot for their halting-place where there were plenty of yellow dandelions at hand for Dan to pick, and a small croft or hollow of dry white sand in which the baby could sit and paddle with her hands and feet, or crow at the spikes of the sea-pinks that broke off short in her fingers when she tried to pluck them. These two occupations lasted for a considerable time; then Dan's mind suddenly reverting to more exciting pleasures than dandelions, he came up to Miss Fane's side, threw down his flowers in a heap, and thrusting a nut-brown fist into her lap, said, "Sweeties!"

"Sweeties? oh no!" cried Katharine, with an accent of deceitful surprise. "No sweeties to-day; Dan, feel in my pocket and see—and baby too. Come, baby and feel!"

A feint by which she won for herself the music—can be any sweeter?—of Dan and baby's surprised gurgling laughter when at length they had pulled out a paper of sugarcandy, peppermint-drops, and other faintly-sticky treasures, and emptied them upon the clean fresh skirt of "lady's" dress. It took another half-hour or so before the refreshment was eaten, for Dan had views on the subject of sweeties not unlike those of his forefathers with respect to jetsam and flot-

sam, holding that, when fortuitous circumstances had once cast them adrift, either from the mouth or fingers of others, and they lay frosted deep in sand on the ground, they were, by right, the property of the finder—views that his sister resented by shrill cries, and beating the air with her hands and feet, whenever he attempted to put them into practice. At last peace was restored. The baby alternately addressing remarks in an unknown language to her own bare pink toes or “lady’s” watch-chain, sat contentedly on Katharine’s lap; Dan, with round eyes, and his little red tongue outstretched upon his chin in admiration, knelt at her side; while, with deft fingers, Miss Fane wove the stalks of his discarded heap of dandelions into chains. “Real chains, Dan: one for you, and one for baby—just like mine.” The jeweller’s work over, Katharine took out her watch, and finding that it was nearly time for her to return home, bade Dan find a stalk with a “clock” on it, to see if mother wanted him yet?

Dan, who was evidently familiar with this system of time-keeping, started off solemnly on his quest among the sand heaps, shortly returning with a “clock,” just in the proper stage of ripe perfection, in his hand; and Katharine, both children watching her, had just blown the last bit of down away from the stalk, when a long shadow passed suddenly between her and the west. She gave a start, and looking up—one hand uplifted to screen the sun from her eyes, the other clasped round the baby, and with Dan, all eagerness as to what the clock said, sitting firmly on her dress—she saw Steven.

“Mr. Lawrence—appearing in his usual ghostly

fashion!" she cried. "What in the world could have brought you here? I've lived fifteen years in Clithero, and never met any but small people like this," laying her hand on Dan's yellow curls, "on the waste before."

"I don't know what brought me here," said Steven, "except it is that I have a kind of instinct for tracking you out and troubling you, Miss Fane. You'll begin to feel soon that you can't get away from me whichever way you walk."

Then he knelt down, a few paces distant from her, on the ground, and thought Katharine Fane had never looked so beautiful (and so near to him) as she did at this minute in her simple white dress, and with the bright sun shining on her face, and these cottage children in her arms! Something in his expression brought up the blood into Katharine's cheeks, and, setting the baby hastily on the sand again, she told Dan to play with her. "And—and which would you call my shortest way home, Mr. Lawrence?"—a palpable attempt at finding conversation. Katharine knew every pathway, every turning, among the fields for miles around. "Straight along by the shore, or through Elliot's hop-garden? Lord Petres is coming by the five o'clock train, you know, and I must be home in time to meet him if I can."

"The shortest way," said Steven, "is neither by the coast nor by Elliot's hop-garden, but through a corner of Ashcot. You should turn to the right just by the two poplars yonder, and go straight across the Five Acres into the London Road. I'll speak the truth," he went on after a moment: "I was working in the Five Acres half an hour ago, and it wasn't ac-

cident at all that brought me here. I saw a white gown and yellow umbrella, and knew it must be you, so I came."

"A white gown and yellow umbrella," cried Katharine, laughing. "I think I had better leave off this Japanese style of dress, if it makes me a landmark for the whole county round. Why, Ashcot must be a mile off, at least?"

"Not that, I think," said Steven; "but I have very good sight at all times, and of course I should know you at any distance."

"I wonder whether that is flattering to me individually," said Katharine, "or only a natural result of wearing yellow umbrellas and white gowns? I don't know how it is," she added, "but you and I can never speak to one another for two minutes without getting on the subject of compliments. Now to-day—you won't be very much surprised, I dare say—but I am going to say something the reverse of complimentary to you to-day."

"Something true, I hope?" said Steven, quickly. "That is all I care about. Whatever you say, you know I shall believe you."

"You may perfectly believe in this. It is—oh, Mr. Lawrence!" cried Katharine, speaking in the quick eager way that, acted or unacted, was so irresistible in her, "it is to say *how* it pains me when I think of your keeping up so much bad feeling towards Dawes! Half the people in the parish have been talking to me about it to-day. When first you told us what you had done I thought you hard, horribly hard—I don't mind saying so. I never liked you so little as when I heard

you speak quietly of having turned the wretched man out of Ashcot, and now——”

“Now, Miss Fane?”

“Oh, Mr. Lawrence, I can’t tell you how much better I should think of you if you would only make amends for your harshness! take Dawes back upon your farm, or, if that cannot be, try at least to do something for him with others. They say no one will give him work—that he is almost in want already. Character, remember, to a labouring man means bread.”

“And dishonesty means dishonesty,” said Steven, promptly. “I acted, as I must always act, up to my own narrow idea of justice, and by such light as I possess, and I should be worse than weak to go back from my own deed now. If Dawes was dishonest he has no right to my help; if he was not, I had no right to turn him off as I did. There’s not much constancy in me,” he added, “either for evil or for good—good especially; but, even with you bidding me, I couldn’t bring myself to treat a rogue like an honest man.”

“Not much constancy in you?” said Katharine, looking up suddenly to his face. “I should have said the very reverse. I should have said inconstancy at least would never be one of your sins.”

Her lip quivered; her eyes sank down, half abashed, from his; and for an instant a wild impulse crossed Steven to tell her, then and there, of his passion, and receive his death-sentence from her lips. He had just reason enough left to keep silent and deliberate for a minute or two; by this time Katharine was speaking again, and the sound of her voice checked back his



madness this time, as the touch of a cool hand checks back for a moment a sick man's fever.

"Yes, indeed, I have credited you hitherto with the rare quality of fidelity," she said. "Don't you remember at the opera I laughed at you for having brought back such a worn-out virtue to the regions of civilization?"

"I remember," said Steven. "You laughed at my primitive virtue, as you called it, when I said I had no wish to throw myself at the feet of any woman living, save one—and she was not a play actress. 'Tis in ruling my own life, Miss Fane, that I am without steadfastness. I believe—I know," added poor Steven, as simply and humbly as a child, "that where my heart was set I could never change. Better for me, you would say, if I could!"

It was the nearest thing to a positive declaration that Katharine had been forced to hear from him; for ever since that night upon the terrace, and while they had daily met alone, and upon the most friendly terms, Steven had as yet jealously guarded his lips from uttering a syllable that could hurry on the fulfilment of his doom. She played somewhat nervously with the children's heap of flower-stalks that lay beside her; took out her watch, and returned it to her belt without in the least seeing to what hour the hands pointed; then began making irrelevant remarks to Dan, who all this time had been sitting, his eyes first turned to one speaker then the other, and still holding the "clock" that Miss Fane had dropped when Steven appeared.

"You are looking very wise, Dan. I wonder what you're thinking of—sweeties in perspective, or what?"

"What do ze clock say?" answered Dan, holding up his dandelion stalk, and not diverted even by the word "sweeties" from his interest in the mysterious work of divination that had been interrupted by Steven.

"Oh," said Katharine, "you have not forgotten that yet, haven't you, Dan? Well, give the clock to me then, and I'll tell you. We had got to five, six, you know; now, 'seven, eight; it's very late.' Ah, the clock tells Dan he must make haste home to mother, and that some one from a great way off—some one Dan loves very much—will be home to-night."

Dan received the intelligence with the perfect good faith of his age; thought over it for a minute or two in silence; then, looking up with his big blue eyes into Katharine's face, said gravely, "and what do ze clock say to lady?"

Here, thought Katharine, with a sudden inspiration of pity, was a great occasion for her to say something "definite" to Steven: something reminding him unmistakably of Lord Petres, and the position in which Lord Petres stood towards herself, yet worded (for Dan's comprehension) in phrase so gentle, so kindly as to put the poor fellow out of his misery painlessly. Painlessly! did not the Frenchman who invented it use some such expression when he first described the beneficent qualities of the guillotine?

"The clock says to lady, Dan, that she must go home quick, because——"

"No, no," interrupted Dan, "seven, eight."

"Oh, you young rogue! how children always will insist upon every syllable being repeated to them verbatim—'seven, eight, getting late.' Well, the clock

says to lady that she must go home quick, and that some one from a great way off will be home to-night——”

“Some one lady loves very much,” interposed Dan, not in a tone of interrogation, but simply as if he was setting Miss Fane straight in her lesson.

“Yes, Dan, quite right!” and Katharine rose hastily to her feet, while a blush, born more than half of guilt, dyed her face and throat. “Some one that lady loves. Poor little Dan!” laying her hand on the child’s shoulder, “what home-truths children speak sometimes in their simplicity, Mr. Lawrence!”

Mr. Lawrence answered never a word, but walked on in silence at Miss Fane’s side, or rather a step or two in advance of her, towards the Neele’s cottage, where the mother stood, surrounded by her other children, and looking out anxiously for Dan and the baby at the door. Katharine of course had to talk to her for a few minutes, and be thanked for her goodness in being troubled with that “good-for-nothing Dan;” and while she was doing so Steven walked slowly on twenty or thirty yards up the lane.

He stopped at the turn beside the poplars that led to Ashcot, and when Miss Fane came up took off his hat, and wished her good morning.

“Good morning?” cried Katharine. “Oh, yes; I had forgotten. Our paths lie apart here if I go by the shore, which I believe is my best way. Mr. Lawrence,” offering him her hand, “I hope you will come over to the Dene soon? I know Lord Petres would like to see you.”

“Thank you, Miss Fane.”

“To-morrow do you think you could come?”

"To-morrow I shall finish cutting the grass, such as it is, in the Five Acres," said Steven. "Besides, you will have plenty to think of without being troubled by me."

"But in the evening?" she pleaded; "when the busy part of the day is over?"

All this time he had forgotten to take her hand; and something in the blank look of his face as he stood there before her touched Katharine to the quick. Even while honour bade her trifle with him no longer, while honour bade her remember her allegiance to Lord Petres, it went so desperately against her vanity to have to surrender Steven's adoration; went so sharply against every better womanly feeling of her heart to have to witness Steven's pain. Besides, putting herself altogether aside, was she not bound, for Dora's sake, to make him feel that the same friendly welcome would await him at the Dene, whether richer, better-born friends were there or not? "We are going, I believe, to have a terrible solemnity in the shape of a dinner-party to-morrow. Lord Haverstock and the rector are coming, I think; but—but I am sure Dora and I will make our escape from the dining-room as early as we can, and get out out of doors. So if you thought you *could* come round about eight o'clock as usual."

Lord Petres had arrived, dinner had begun before Katharine reached home; and when she appeared at table, still in her morning dress and with a bunch of wild roses at her waistbelt, the only explanation she could give of herself was that she had been visiting

the poor people along the waste, and "got lost" on her way home.

"Lost!" cried Mr. Hilliard, opening his eyes wide; "however could you get lost, Kate, and the road along the coast as straight as a die?"

"Why, you see I took a short cut through Ashcot, papa," said Katharine, flinching, she knew not why, under Mrs. Dering's eyes. "Steven Lawrence met me and showed me the way, and—and I don't think it was a short cut after all."

"I suppose you have been botanising, Kate dear," said Mrs. Dering, glancing sharply at Katharine's flowers. "You know you always forget time and dinner and everything else when you are weed-hunting."

Lord Petres smiled his accustomed placid smile, and went on with his soup.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### A HONEYMOON IN TANGIERS.

It was not without a purpose that Mrs. Dering had voluntarily come down for three days to the country and to her relations during the height of the London season. To say that she believed a sister of hers could stoop so low as to break her faith with a man in the position of Lord Petres would be unjust. Still, a certain tone in Katharine's letters of late, a tone of open defiant exaltation of the country and simple country life over London, had—with hints gathered from other members of the family as to Steven's daily presence at the Dene—been sufficient to impress on a woman of Mrs. Dering's principles the wisdom of allowing her

sister's engagement to lag no longer. What, indeed, were they waiting for? Would Lord Petres grow fonder of the thought of matrimony, or Katharine fonder of him, by all this delay? Was it dignified to allow the marriage to be put off thus from one year's end to another? As poor Lord Petres' health was so uncertain, why not fix for the wedding to take place early in the coming autumn, and then let them go off to Italy, Algeria, or any other climate best suited to the bridegroom's lungs for the winter?

So argued Mrs. Dering in a solemn after-dinner conclave with the Squire and her mother, held in Mrs. Hilliard's dressing-room; further urging, as a first practical step in the right direction, that the Squire should have an interview with Lord Petres, as early next morning as he should be visible, on the hitherto neglected subject of settlements. It could be done without consulting Katharine at all. Girls, naturally, were too romantic ever to bear the mention of money, said Mrs. Dering; looking back, no doubt, to the romantic period of her own life, when she was engaged to General Dering. Let the Squire consult with Lord Petres about everything: settlements, pin-money, the month in which the marriage should take place, their plans for the winter; then let Katharine be told quietly of the result. Mrs. Dering believed dear Kate would be happier when she knew that matters were definitely settled. Mrs. Dering had observed that Kate looked decidedly pale at dinner to-day, and could not feel sure that the long engagement was not really beginning to tell upon the poor child's spirits.

It was long before Mr. Hilliard could be brought into accepting the rôle proposed for him. There had

never been much cordiality between his eldest step-daughter and the straightforward, warm-hearted Squire; and that Arabella proposed a thing was generally reason enough, *per se*, for Mr. Hilliard to turn obstinate on the instant. He never had any opinion, he said, of this bringing a man up to book. Mrs. Dering looked her quiet indignation at the vulgarity of the phrase. When people wanted to get married, they would *get* married: you might be quite sure about that. It was much fitter Lord Petres should come to him, than he to Lord Petres, on the subject of settlements. Kate had a good many years of youth before her, and, thank God, wasn't tired of her home yet! Let her have plenty of time to think twice before marrying Lord Petres: "a good enough man in his way, no doubt," said the Squire, jumping up, and waxing hotter and hotter at the sound of his own voice, "but not what I ever thought Kate's husband ought to be; and then, if the poor girl has a mind to change—let her! Better change before than after, Arabella, is what I say in these matters."

Arabella was silent. Ten years of marriage had taught Mrs. Dering how much is to be gained by arguing with a man whose intellect or whose temper is inferior to your own. Mrs. Hilliard, guided by one of the sublime intuitions of folly, burst into a flood of tears, and said she never thought her Richard's children would be told, before her face, that she had degraded herself by a mercenary second marriage.

The suddenness, the utter injustice of this side attack, was more than the Squire could bear up against. By the time he had sworn that he meant nothing personal when he spoke of mercenary marriages; that he

did not mean Katharine's would be a mercenary marriage; that, in fact, he meant nothing whatsoever, but was a monster for having said it;—by the time the Squire was brought to acknowledge this, he was no longer in a state to dispute any mere matter of detail that might be imposed upon him. Mrs. Dering calmly recapitulated, then wrote down on a slip of paper all that it would behove him to say: settlements so much; pin-money so much; marriage in such a month; Algeria for the winter. And at twelve o'clock next day, hot in the flesh and in the spirit alike, poor Mr. Hilliard found himself waiting in the breakfast-room for Lord Petres, to whom he—or rather to whom Mrs. Dering—had already written a premonitory note in the morning.

It was a bright summer's day, dry and warm as August, but Lord Petres' disbelief in English climate and English country houses was too thorough to be shaken by a gleam of accidental sunshine, and when at length he made his appearance, it was in a thick morning coat, buttoned up to the chin, and with a Cashmere scarf round his throat. The Squire, who, for the sake of his visitor, and under Mrs. Dering's orders, was enduring a blazing wood fire (in a thorough draught), ran at once and shut up the windows. "We country people live with a good deal of air about us," he said, pausing before shutting out the last breath of fresh air; "but I suppose you——"

"Thank you, my dear sir; I certainly *do* prefer having as few draughts as possible," said Lord Petres, in his small mild voice. "In warm climates I can live out of doors like the natives, but in England it seems to me the outer air can never be safely breathed ex-



cept under the condition of violent bodily exercise, for which, I am sorry to say, I have no strength."

He seated himself beside the fire, warming his thin blue-veined hands, and looking ready for any martyrdom that might be in store for him. The Squire came back to the hearthrug, and began shifting from one foot to another, in utter perplexity as to how he should tell this poor little dyspeptic, melancholy guest of his that he must be married before autumn! If he had only got Arabella's list in his hand, he thought, he might do it. Something of Arabella's delicate tact might be infused into him by the sight of the different items jotted down in her firm, clear handwriting. But, of course, it would never do to show such tangible proof of female tutelage as this; so, after struggling with himself for a minute or two, and getting so red that Lord Petres, who was silently watching him, thought he was going to have a fit of apoplexy—the Nemesis of all the underdone meats such a man must have eaten during his life! the Squire burst, apropos of nothing, into the following question: "And—and when do you talk of the marriage coming off, then, Lord Petres?"

Lord Petres stroked down his small black whiskers with his small delicate fingers; put his head slightly on one side, and surveyed the Squire with feeble wonder. "Marriage!" he repeated, plaintively. "My dear Mr. Hilliard, do I hear you aright?—marriage?"

"Hang the man, and hang everything belonging to him!" thought the Squire, pettishly. "What else should I mean? Yes, Lord Petres, *marriage*. I—I—the fact is, I'm afraid your health isn't what it ought to be, and we thought, perhaps, if you spent the winter in a

warmer climate, Tangiers, now—no, that isn't it! where the deuce was it? well, never mind—that's neither here nor there—a warmer climate, at all events."

A warmer climate. Here was something definite at least: something Arabella had told him; something inoffensive to Lord Petres, and uncompromising of Kate; and Mr. Hilliard was determined to stick to it. "Yes, a warmer climate," he repeated, putting his hands behind him, and looking up at the ceiling with the air of a man who knows his duty, and who has every intention of performing it.

"But why Tangiers?" said Lord Petres. "I'm grateful, very, to any one who takes an interest in my miserable state, and any data respecting the sanitary influence of different climates is of value to me, but why Tangiers?"

"I don't say that it was Tangiers," said the Squire; "I'm not up in these invalid places—thank God! England was always a good enough climate for me. As you suffer so at home, even in weather like this, we thought some warmer place would set you up for next winter, and . . . and—in that case—we would see if we couldn't manage to have the wedding over by autumn."

Lord Petres sat motionless, slowly opening and shutting his eyes, and looking as if he were conscientiously trying to let the meaning of the extraordinary proposal he had just heard gain egress to his brain. It was evident at last that he had to give up the attempt in despair. "The stupidity that besets me of a morning is not a good sign—not at all a good sign," he said, shaking his head mournfully. "Bright ascribes

it to some abnormal irritation of the pneumogastric nerves, and tells me it is not unfrequently a fore-runner of paralysis—which is cheering. Now you will think it incredible when I tell you that I do not yet understand about Tangiers. Is it considered a good climate for persons—to speak frankly, Mr. Hilliard—for persons labouring under a complication of bronchial and dyspeptic disorders, like mine? and what—you must pardon me still more—is the connection, from a climatic point of view, between Tangiers and marriage?”

“He is a fool,” thought the Squire; “a hopeless, hypochondriacal idiot; and the plainer you speak to such a man the better. My dear Lord Petres, you must be aware that as regards your engagement to Kate, I can have only one feeling?” Lord Petres’ face was as the face of a statue. “I married her mother when the child was little, and I believe I’ve done my duty by her as if she had been my own. Well, Kate’s one-and-twenty now, and sensible enough to judge for herself in the matter of choosing a husband. My opinion has not been asked—no, my opinion has *not* been asked,” said the Squire, rather huskily; “and all I have got to do for poor Kate is a mere matter of business. Her mother and sister seem to think the engagement has lasted long enough, Lord Petres, and—and—they wished me to speak to you about it.”

All Lord Petres’ affectation of stupidity vanished as if by magic. The honest physical evidences of heat and nervousness upon the Squire’s face, his earnest voice, his trembling lip as he spoke of Katharine, appealed to the blasé little man of the world as no tortuous circumlocution of a mere clever diplomatist, like Mrs. Dering, would ever have done. The good,

fussy Squire, was acting, he could see, under orders, and under protest; acting, for very certain, without Kate's knowledge, and not in the smallest degree from any personal eagerness of his own to forward the marriage. From the moment in which Mrs. Dering first let him know that his attentions were serious until the present, Lord Petres had never really swerved for one instant from his loyalty to Katharine. Marriage would be a serious blow to him, he felt; the loss of Duclos a more serious blow still; but Kate was the one woman on earth who could best make up to him for all he would be called upon to sacrifice. Besides, Utopian though he might be in principle, Lord Petres, as I have before said, was perfectly old-fashioned and conservative in the ordering of his own life. He voted with his party in politics; attended the services of the church to which he hereditarily belonged; and had always felt, whatever his theoretic convictions on the subject of marriage, that it would be incumbent upon him, personally to marry before he died. So now, enormously to the Squire's relief, his future stepson rose up, gave him a friendly little shake of the hand, thanked him for the kind interest he was showing in him, both as regarded his health and his domestic happiness, and expressed the delight it would afford him (seating himself by the fire again, as he said this, and vainly trying to look cheerful) to have a near day fixed for the wedding.

Talk about money followed, in the easiest way in the world. Lord Petres' ideas of settlements were more liberal than anything that Mrs. Dering had bid the Squire stipulate for. So much jointure in the event of his death—to be unaltered by any second marriage of

Katharine's; so much pin-money; and Kate's own small fortune (for Katharine was an heiress to the extent of five thousand pounds, left her a year or two ago by her godmother) to be exclusively her own, of course. And radiant with satisfaction at having got over this part of his work so well, the Squire was just noting down some memento of his success in his pocket-book at Lord Petres' side, when Katharine herself, fresh as the morning, and with her arms full of flowers, opened the glass door that led from the breakfast-room to the garden. Her eyes were dazzled still by the bright sunshine in which she had been standing; and for a moment she walked on, unconscious that she was not alone, and singing under her voice the "Apparvi alla luce" that she had last listened to with Steven at the opera.

"Ahem! Kate, my love!" cried the Squire, putting his pocket-book behind him, then dropping it into his pocket with as frightened a feeling as if he had been detected in plotting a forgery. "Why, Kate, you're looking as blooming as your own roses. What—what time is it, my dear?" The consciousness of his guilt made the Squire stammer and turn red.

"What time?" said Katharine, looking quickly, first at Mr. Hilliard's face, then at Lord Petres'. "Well, papa, as the clock is precisely opposite to you, I should think you might tell! It is exactly seventeen minutes and a half to one."

"Seventeen minutes to one!" cried the Squire, seizing up his hat which stood on a side-table, and making a hasty retreat towards the window, "and I promised to see old Elliot at noon! Lord Petres, if you will excuse me, I must run away. If the after-

noon is warm enough I wish you would come down and look at my Guernsey heifer—Kate you will know where to find me?”

The moment the lovers were alone Kate tossed down her heap of flowers on the table, and came up to Lord Petres' side. “You are looking worried,” she said. “What is the matter? what has papa been saying to you?”

Lord Petres turned his eyes up to Katharine's sweet summer face, and felt a really epicurean regret that he could not be more in love with her. He took her hand, her cool hand round which the scent of carnations and daphnes clung yet, and kissed it. “Mr. Hilliard has been talking to me of a great many things; Tangiers, among the rest. You and I are going to Tangiers, Kate.”

“I hope not, Lord Petres.”

“We are going there this winter. It is a great climate, Mr. Hilliard tells me, for invalids of my class, and as I refuse to be banished alone, you must just go with me, Katharine!”

“And what will Monsieur Duclos do?”

“Oh, the time has past for thinking of Duclos,” answered Lord Petres. “As our friend Lawrence says,—are there no other French cooks to be had in the world besides Duclos?”

Something in the seriousness of his face or the mention of Steven, or both, made Katharine change colour. “What *has* papa been talking about?” she cried hastily. “Now, I insist upon knowing!”

“We have been talking about fixing our wedding-day, Kate,” and all this time Lord Petres held her hand in his. “These long delays are very well for

you, but at my age, and in my precarious state, I naturally grudge every month which—”

“Enables Duclos to remain with you?” interrupted Katharine as Lord Petres’ inability to speak anything but the truth made him hesitate. “I know quite well what all this means, Lord Petres! Bella has been giving us her advice. You and papa indeed! As if you are not, both of you, much too fond of me to originate such a cabal! Bella, because her own engagement was a short one, thinks she is to impose her example upon us. She shall do no such thing. Courtship, all poets and novel-writers agree, is the best part of life; then I say let the best part be eked out as long as possible. Tangiers, too! You and I in Tangiers!”

Katharine Fane’s laugh had never sounded so musical as it did at this moment to Lord Petres’ ears. The breaking-up of his life, the departure of Dulcos, all seemed reprieved indefinitely to him by the ring of that girlish, heart-whole laugh. “You are very cruel!” he said. “After leaving Paris in the pleasantest June I ever saw there, after risking my health by travelling about in this inclement climate——”

“And after hoping to go, as a married man, to Tangiers, to be sentenced to a longer term of bachelor misery in Paris and London? Oh, Lord Petres, I am so sorry for you!”

“Show it, Kate.”

“How?”

He drew her to his side, and—for about the third time since their engagement—touched her cheek with his pale lips. Mrs. Dering, who was passing before the window, happened just then to look in upon them;

and a hot thrill of shame and indignation and self-contempt passed suddenly through Katharine's heart.

Until this moment she had never fully and thoroughly realised that the play had a meaning in it: that little Lord Petres would one day be Katharine Fane's husband!

## CHAPTER XX.

Coffee on the Terrace.

THE dinner-party that evening was not remarkable for its brilliancy, Lord Petres in the course of the afternoon had had his hand pressed by Mrs. Dering with a sisterly warmth that he could not hide from himself was fraught with cruellest significance for the future; he had also been conducted through long grass to see the Squire's heifers, and had got his feet damp; and throughout the last twenty-four hours had partaken only of nourishment prepared by a "good plain" English cook. Could it be wondered at if Lord Petres' eyes looked more glassy, his white face more resigned and melancholy than usual, during the entire festivity—a festivity which, like the death-feasts of the Indians, was being celebrated, he knew, in mocking honour of himself, the victim destined hereafter for immolation. Katharine, who looked mortally wearied with everybody, sat between her lover and the rector, saying yes and no at hazard, and as the evening wore on giving many furtive glances across the lawn towards the terrace; the point where Steven Lawrence was accustomed at this hour of sunset to appear. Mrs. Dering talked, and talked well, as usual; she was a woman whose special vocation it was to supply ad-



mirable small talk under all accidents or changes of human life; but with the best will in the world, one person, unsupported, can scarcely furnish adequate conversation for a dinner-party of seven. The rector, piqued at the onset of dinner by Katharine's treatment of one of his best stories, confined himself silently to eating and drinking for the remainder of the meal; and Lord Haverstock (a tall, indefinitely-coloured creature, aquiline-nosed, good-humoured eyed, and with an inch and a half of forehead) was so horribly frightened at finding himself next to Dot; the poor boy was always frightened to death by every young woman higher in rank than a barmaid; that he never opened his lips except in scared monosyllables from the moment he began his soup until the ladies had left the table.

"Such are little sociable dinners," said Katharine, when at length, with her sister and Dot, she had made her escape to the garden. "How intensely stupid it all was! How intensely stupid men are! How wise mamma was to have a headache, and keep in her own room!"

"I don't think it was at all stupid, Kate," said Mrs. Dering. "It just seemed to me one of those pleasant friendly parties where people talk or are silent as they like. How wonderfully good-looking the rector is, and *how* Lord Haverstock has improved!"

Kate gave a little dry laugh. "Improved! What can Lord Haverstock have been like in his former state, if in his present one he is improved? Now suppose he wasn't Lord Haverstock at all, but a son of Mills the horse-dealer, what should we say of him, I wonder, with his horsey look and slang expressions,

when he does open his lips—and his awkwardness and stupidity?”

Mrs. Dering was too wise, and too well pleased with the success of her own diplomacy, to attempt to contradict any of Katharine's radical opinions to-night. “Poor Lord Haverstock! he is certainly not over-brilliant or over-handsome; but how charming your new rector is! I had not seen him before. No wonder he has made you a convert to Anglicanism, Katharine!”

“If he is always as eloquent as he was to-day, I should think his life would be spent in making converts,” said Katharine. “*Did* he speak a dozen words from the beginning of dinner till its close?”

“Well, my opinion is that everybody was so silent because they had a kind of wedding-breakfast cloud hanging over them!” cried Dot incisively. “The coming event begins to cast its shadow before. As I looked at you, Kate, sitting in your white dress at Lord Petres' side I could quite have imagined that we were assisting already at the marriage feast.”

“That I can very well believe,” said Katharine, quietly. “Lord Petres looked miserable enough, even for a bridegroom, I am sure. I must tell him seriously by and by, that I have no more intention of being married now than I ever had. Something besides the country and the bad cooking is telling on the poor little fellow's spirits, I am sure.”

Mrs. Dering laughed, and affected to treat this remark of her sister's as a pleasantry; but a few minutes later she put her hand within Katharine's arm, and managed to get her away to the terrace-walk, out of Dot's hearing. “I have not had an opportunity to

“speak to you before, Kate,” she whispered. “How glad, how very glad I am, dearest, to think that everything is settled!”

“Settled? as regards what, Bella?”

“Ah, don’t jest, Katharine, when you are alone with me—settled as regards your approaching marriage! Lord Petres spoke to papa this morning, and wants it to be very soon, and was most liberal—but we won’t even talk of that. Come Kate,” said Mrs. Dering, affectionately, “don’t pretend to me that you and Lord Petres are not thoroughly d’accord in everything.”

“I should say,” said Katharine, speaking slowly and with deliberation, “that Lord Petres and I are ‘d’accord,’ as you call it, in nothing. Oh, I know what you would remind me of,” she cried, as Mrs. Dering was about to interrupt her, and with an almost painful blush rising over her face. “You looked in through the window to-day, and you saw that Lord Petres kissed me; I believe it was the second time he ever did so, Bella! Some great ceremonial of the kind took place when we were first told that we were engaged, and I didn’t mind it much then. I never even thought of love in those days. I mean, I mean—oh, dear me,” and she turned and looked wistfully into her sister’s face; “I don’t think I ever *can* marry Lord Petres!”

Whatever Mrs. Dering felt, she was outwardly, thorough mistress of the situation. “All girls think much the same,” she answered soothingly. “I am sure I thought a dozen, a hundred times, before I married General Dering, that I did not really care enough for him, yet you see how happy I am, Kate!”

"I am a very different woman to you, Bella."

"You are a woman," said Mrs. Dering, "exactly suited to the position in which Lord Petres can place you. Let us talk sense, not sentiment, Kate! You are a woman fond of society, and of shining there, fond of London, fond, in a restricted sense, of the country; fond of everything cultivated and refined in life; and all this can be given through money alone. Besides, Katharine," she added gravely, "although it is a subject in which my conscience forbids me to sympathise, I cannot but feel that your holding, in your heart, the religious opinions which Lord Petres professes openly, is an immense tie to bind you together. If I could think, if I could hope," cried Mrs. Dering, "that there was a chance of your abandoning what I must ever hold to be Romish error, I should feel differently. But I do not think this. I believe you sincere in your religion, as you are in everything else, Kate, and I am sufficiently free from narrow-mindedness to rejoice that you are to marry a Catholic. What chance of earthly happiness can there be," said Mrs. Dering, solemnly, "unless married people think alike on the sacred subject that outweighs all others?"

Every word in this long speech was well chosen. Katharine knew that she did like society, and shining in society; London, country, and everything else that money could give. Still, had Mrs. Dering stopped here, her arguments had been insufficient. What were these things worth, Katharine would have asked, when they came to be weighed against the sweet liberty which she must surrender to gain them? But the vision of returning to the church of her predilection and her birth—of being in a position to give that faith sub-

stantial support—was one that during the last eighteen months had lain very near to Katharine Fane's heart.

A child of seven when her mother remarried (and from indolence, and the distance of the Dene from a Roman Catholic chapel, and the love of being a martyr, combined, went over to the Squire's faith), Katharine, a stout little papist already, had obstinately rebelled from the first against exchanging her blue rosary, and pretty prayers to the Virgin, for Mrs. Trimmer and the church catechism as broken up and made easy by Pinnock. Clithero church and its services seemed hideous and bare, indeed; after the glittering convent chapel in which the child had been accustomed to hear mass at York: the chapel with windows that cast rainbow pictures upon an inlaid floor; and paintings of Mother and Child, and soft-eyed saints around the walls; and crucifix and snow-white lilies upon the altar; and even the roof covered with blue clouds and gilded stars and angel faces—always specially smiling down on little Kate.

"I like my new papa, and I like my pony," the child said, trying to be just; "but I don't like being a Protestant. I like chapel because they sing, and have pictures, and swing incense there. I like to watch the serving boys; I like to see the silver cross and the little pink roses on Father Austin's back, and I *hate* Clithero church, and the ugly old man in a white gown! And when I am a woman I'll go to chapel again like my own papa did."

Time, and the irresistible weight of example, made the child a Protestant of course; that is to say, she fretted after the blue beads no more; and she said (aloud) the formulas she was taught to say, and did

not behave worse than other children of her age at the parish church. Arabella, who even at this early age was a young person swayed by her reason rather than emotions, had been brought without much difficulty to see that living in a Protestant neighbourhood, and under the roof of a Protestant stepfather, the tenets of Popery were errors that it was good taste for her to abjure. And whatever Arabella, at her advanced time of life, and with her superior wisdom did, Kate, poor little soul! felt could not be very wrong for her to do likewise. Still, the poetry, the fragrance of the old religion was never really crushed out from her memory. If her new home, instead of being the Dene, had been Ashcot; if the worship, which was to replace the glitter and sweet incense and sweet music of the mass had been the worship of Shiloh, a very few months would probably have sufficed to turn Katharine into just as staunch a Wesleyan as she had once been a papist. She was a warm, passionate-natured little creature; craving to love, craving to be loved in return by men and women, but also by the good saints and by heaven! And, notwithstanding their lack of outside beauty, the familiar hymns, the homely services of Shiloh had, I think, sufficient real human heartiness in them to have filled the simple measure of a child's soul.

As it was, the religion they told her to give up was replaced—I may say it boldly—by none. The Squire's whole kindly life was, in truth, religion put into practice; and to him, instinct-guided, Kate clung. But the Squire was a man darkly ignorant as to theological differences. A papist, a unitarian, a quaker, might each, without detriment to his belief, have had

Mr. Hilliard for an associate. He had taken very little part in his wife's conversion; none at all in the hiding away of Kate's blue beads. The Church of England was the faith into which he himself had been born, and in which he meant to die; and he went regularly to church, and repeated the responses, and listened (a little beyond the text) to the sermon on Sunday; and dined at two o'clock for the sake of the servants; and never broke the sanctity of the day otherwise than by furtively taking his long spud and digging up weeds in retired parts of the garden of an afternoon. From Monday morning till Saturday night he thought of nothing higher than his mangels and heifers, and improving his land, and the condition of the poor who lived on it, with such other narrow interests and employments as immediately belonged to his narrow groove of life. And, young as she was, little Kate soon felt that the Squire, except in sickness, regarded the mention of any sacred name or subject on a week day as a sort of sacrilege.

Once and once only, they were very happy picking peas together in the kitchen garden, she had asked him if he "understood why" the cock should have crowed just at the right time to reprove St. Peter?

"I understand nothing, my dear—not as much as why the peas grow sideways in the pods," said the Squire. "What you and I have got to mind, Kate, is, to do our duty at all times, and believe what the parson tells us in church of a Sunday."

And this answer had been sufficient to warn the child for ever off all controversial or doctrinal ground, as far as her stepfather was concerned.

From her mother the only allusion she ever heard

to a life higher than one of medicine-taking and novel-reading, was when Mrs. Hilliard would plaintively murmur of how she had given up her own personal welfare, temporal and eternal, for her children's sake. A statement which, coming from a human creature lying on a luxurious sofa, and with as much calf's foot jelly as she chose to eat at her side, was too mysterious and awful to bear much real significance to a child's mind. Arabella, until her marriage, never exhibited any fruits of Protestant belief more convincing than the possession of a purple velvet church-service, which Kate was not allowed to touch; and Dot, when Dot appeared on the scene, was frankly and without affectation a pagan.

"You fret to be Catholique once more?" Dora had said in the early days of her arrival, and when Kate, relying on her cousin's childish appearance for sympathy, had bared to her the state of her conscience. "Bah! they are one so good as ze other. Catholique in Paris—Protestant in England! Go—what matters it?"

These had been the spiritual influences of Katharine's life; the influences which had so signally failed to efface the convent chapel with its gilded shrine and snow-white liles, its solemn mass and plaintive nun-chanted Litanies, from her heart!

Into the intrinsic truth or error of conflicting creeds she had, I must confess, not striven to penetrate very far. Katharine Fane was not what many people call "intellectual," and her active out-of-door habits—varied latterly by a few weeks' unresting London excitement during the season—left her little time for theological, or, indeed, for deep studies of any kind. Her ideal of life had always been that it should be thoroughly en-



joyable and picturesque; a life in which everybody, rich and poor, should love Katharine Fane! a life made up of flowers and sunshine; pictures, music, pretty things of all sorts; with a picturesque religion (the old church seemed such an one to her) to correspond. And until the last few weeks the possibility of existence yielding more than such facile inch-deep happiness, had never troubled Katharine's imagination. She was handsome and young, and could make everybody think as she liked; and when she was Lady Petres she would restore the old Catholic chapel down at Eccleston, and go back openly to the church herself, and have a chaplain with a pathetic voice to say mass, and convert all the Protestant poor on her husband's estates, and found a convent in which Dot, if she did not marry, might take refuge. This had been her dream; this, as Mrs. Dering well knew, was the rock of strength on which Katharine's fidelity to her engagement rested.

"You know that what I say is true, Kate. You know that for every reason your marriage with Lord Petres will be an excellent one—and if you would only listen to me, if you would only have a little more faith in my experience, you would not delay your engagement too long. Dora, from what she tells me, is likely to be married before the winter, and I really do not see what but perversity can make you wish to remain at home after she is gone."

Katharine turned her head impatiently aside from her sister. Far away across the purple bay she could see a dark spot upon the water; and her heart told her that it was Steven's boat.

"Yes," went on Mrs. Dering, in her measured voice, "there is, I suppose, no longer any doubt about it.

The young man is here, Dora says, every day of his life; and, of course, all that we can do now is to bear the misalliance with the best grace possible. What do you say, Kate?"

"I say nothing, Bella. I'm stupid, and out of spirits, I think—at all events, I don't mean to talk about any more love affairs, if I can help it, to-night."

"What, not when your favourite Steven is the hero? Surely you have not lost your interest in him already, dear Katharine."

Dear Katharine continued silently to watch the boat and the figure in it as both grew gradually more and more distinct; and Mrs. Dering, after vainly waiting some minutes for a reply, took herself off in despair to Dot, who, very sylvan-looking in a pale green muslin dress, and with a natural rose in her short hair, was arranging cups and saucers on a rustic table at the other end of the terrace.

"It has taken ten years to make Uncle Frank consent to have coffee out of doors in hot weather," said Dot; "but I have got my own way about it at last. What is the good of having a garden, and terraces, and natural flowers, I say, unless one uses them? English people declare they like the country—perhaps they do, in a cow-like ruminating fashion—but they certainly don't know how to enjoy it: no, not half as much as the smallest Parisian shopkeeper, who all through the fine season, goes and drinks his coffee out of doors in the Bois."

"Possibly English people can enjoy the country without eating and drinking out of doors," remarked Mrs. Dering, sententiously. "English people don't pre-

tend, you must remember, to be always turning life into fête-days, like the French—”

“They don’t indeed!” interrupted Dora. “The worse for those whose lot it is to live among them!”

“Well, my dear,” said Mrs. Dering, “when you have a home—a nice little rural home of your own, you will be able to take your coffee out of doors every evening of your life, and play at fête-days, and fancy yourself in France again as much as you like! At all events,” she added, “I am glad to think, Dora, that you are beginning to talk of enjoying country pleasures in any form. If, as you tell me, you allow Mr. Steven Lawrence to come here every day of the week, there is not much doubt, I suppose, what your future life is going to be?”

“I allow?” cried Dot, with one of her mocking laughs. “Katharine allows, you mean. I told you Steven Lawrence came here every evening, as regularly as the sun sets, and so he does—but not for me. I never take to myself attentions meant in reality for others, Bella dear! At first the poor fellow used to try and find excuses for coming so often. He had a message for the Squire, or the weather was so fine he thought the young ladies would like to go out a bit in his boat, but now he comes daily and with no excuse at all. Comes to see Kate, bien entendu, and Kate alone; and thinks about as much of me as he does of Zuleika.”

“It is impossible he can think of anybody *but* you,” said Mrs. Dering, with calm incredulity. “Quite impossible; from the little I saw of him in town I should judge Steven Lawrence to be a thoroughly sensible young man. He feels shy, no doubt, at first,

and addresses himself to Kate rather than you until he can be sure what ground he stands upon."

Dot gave a meaning little shrug of the shoulders by way of reply, and just at this moment the Squire with Lord Haverstock and the rector—all looking as picturesque as men generally do in black suits and white ties—made their appearance on the terrace, followed, after an interval, by Lord Petres, wrapped up as usual, and with his French valet bearing an immense seal-skin rug and a heap of Scotch plaids behind.

"You are quite right to take precautions, Lord Petres," said Mrs. Dering; Katharine who had slowly sauntered up having asked him if he was going to Siberia. "However fine the weather looks I never believe myself that the evening air is not really damp before August. Thanks," as Lord Petres offered her a share in the seal-skin. "Fond as I am of the country and everything belonging to it, I must confess that I prefer sitting on a good thick fur to the damp ground. Kate, dear, there is room still for you."

"Thank you, Bella," said Katharine, "it makes me quite warm enough to look at you both:" for Mrs. Dering, with fine appreciation of furs in July, had seated herself at her future brother-in-law's side. "In weather like this the colder and damper every thing feels the better I say. Isn't the sea blue to-night, Lord Haverstock? doesn't the very look of it always make you wish you were there?"

The very sound of a lady's voice, propounding a direct question to himself, always startled Lord Haverstock to an extent that made him wish himself in truth at the very bottom of the sea. But feeling that

it was an occasion on which something complimentary might be expected of him, the poor boy answered, after shifting about his large hands and feet in tortures of shyness, that he thought perhaps it was very pleasant here, that is to say, he didn't know, really, whether it was possible for a fellow to be better off than they all were now, but certainly——"

"I have often thought, Miss Fane," said the rector, speaking in the well-trained well-pitched tone that always so fatally reminded Katharine of some one reading aloud out of an improving book; "I have often thought how the view of the sea from your terrace reminds one of bits of the Mediterranean, flowers at one's feet, evergreens growing close down to the water, the smooth blue bay beyond, the distant line of coast which, fancy aiding somewhat, might be Ischia or Capri, the——"

"What, Steven!" interrupted Dot's ringing voice, amidst a little clatter of the coffee cups: "I declare you looked just like the figure in Don Giovanni, rising up suddenly in that spectre-like way from nowhere! Arabella—Mr. Lawrence—Katharine dear, here is Steven."

## CHAPTER XXI.

### The Farm Garden.

THE sun, which during the last quarter of an hour, had been hidden behind a bank of low-lying violet cloud, threw out his last ray before setting at this moment; and the light shone full upon Steven Lawrence's figure, as he walked slowly up to the group of people on the terrace.

He was dressed in his accustomed yeoman fashion; not in any of the fashionable clothes made for him by Lord Petres' London tailor; a light velveteen suit, drab gaiters, a coloured handkerchief knotted round his throat, a wide-awake hat, with a bit of clover stuck in its ribbon; dressed no better, save in the fineness of his linen, than any of the well-to-do workmen or gardeners about the Squire's grounds; but bearing, thought Katharine, in his handsome face and graceful "savage" mien, far more of nature's unconscious nobility than did young Lord Haverstock, or her own poor little pallid lover, or even the Oxford-trained rector, with his ultra air of refinement and artificial self-occupied voice and manner.

She stood silent, actually with a blush—a *blush* upon her cheeks! Mrs. Dering noted, until Steven had shaken hands with the men of the party, and talked for a minute or so to Dora, who began calling him Steven at once—evidently quite ready to exhibit her intimacy with him before the world—then crossed over to the table, and, to Mrs. Dering's growing dissatisfaction, poured out a cup of coffee for him with her own hand.

"Dear Kate is so impulsive!" she whispered; interrupting Lord Petres in some information he was solemnly giving her as to the best way of dressing ortolans. "So good-hearted! Everything she does is done so thoroughly—too thoroughly, perhaps—on the spur of the moment!"

"I thought you were not going to look at me, at all," said Katharine, as she stood at Steven's side. "You spoke to papa, and Lord Petres, and Dora—to

every one, in short, but me. What is it like at sea to-night?"

"It is calm but fresh," answered Steven; "fresher than when I took you and Miss Dora out the other night."

"I have a great mind to propose an adjournment there now," cried Katharine. "It would be a wonderfully pleasant change for everybody, I am sure!" with a little tired sigh.

"The boat would not hold everybody," said Steven, matter of fact as usual. "As I came along, I confess I thought I might tempt you and Miss Dora to come out, but now I see that I am too late."

"Too late! and why too late?" said Katharine, the consciousness that Mrs. Dering was listening to them urging her onward. "As far as I am concerned, I say frankly, I should like nothing better—that is, if some of the others will go too. Dot, what do you say? Will you come out for a row in Mr. Lawrence's boat? Now I am sure you would enjoy it."

But Dot, mindful of the fleeting nature of green muslin, and not wholly forgetful of young Lord Haverstock, had no inclination for boating. She was quite sure there was a swell; decidedly more swell at all events than there had been the other evening, and even then she felt frightened; and perhaps it would get dark suddenly! Nothing she had such a horror of as being out, *en pleine mer*, in the dark. So Katharine addressed herself to Mrs. Dering.

"Mr. Lawrence offers to take some of us out in his boat, Bella. There is room, I think, for four. Will you come? No. Then you will, Lord Petres. Oh,

indeed you must, the fresh air out in the bay will do you a world of good."

But after talking about marriage settlements in the morning, walking over damp grass to see heifers in the afternoon, and finally dining off a "good plain" English dinner, in commemoration of his own approaching wedding, the eloquence of the most beautiful lips in the world would not have made Lord Petres conclude his day in the country by voluntarily encountering more damp and misery, and discomfort of every kind in a boat.

"I never go on any portion of the Channel, thank you, Kate, except that between Calais and Dover, and then my sufferings are so atrocious that I think on every occasion I cross it will be for the last time. We are the playthings of fate, Mrs. Dering," added Lord Petres, as Mrs. Dering looked duly interested and sympathetic. "I often ask myself by what grim irony was I, with my defective organization, called into existence now, instead of a hundred years or so hence, when new methods of locomotion will have made steamers and sea-sickness things of the past."

"If new methods of locomotion are to do away with boating," said Katharine, "I, for one, would much sooner live out my poor morsel of existence now. Look at that smooth shining water, Lord Petres; who wouldn't sooner cross it in a trim little yacht at this moment than be impelled across in a monster balloon, or transmitted, perhaps, through a submarine tube like a parcel?"

"I think we are very much better on dry land than in a balloon or a boat either," put in Mrs. Dering; "we can see just as much of the shining water as we like—



at a distance, and go into the house as soon as it gets cold."

"And in the meantime are at the height of a most important discussion on ortolans," said Lord Petres, gravely. "Kate, don't let our incapacity for maritime enjoyment keep you on shore. Lawrence will take every care of you, I know, and Mrs. Dering and I are in the middle of a conversation which will occupy us very pleasantly till you return."

Katharine hesitated. "If papa would come," she said, glancing at the Squire, who, in an eager undertone, was telling Lord Haverstock about the melancholy death of his prize-pig, from which so much had been expected: "Near upon four hundred-weight," Kate overheard him say, in a broken voice, "and gone in a moment, sir! gone like the snuff of a candle;" "but there is not much use in asking him. Papa."

"What, my dear?"

"Will you come with us on the water for an hour or so? Mr. Lawrence has brought his boat round, and I think it would be so cool and pleasant out in the bay."

"Then do you go, by all means, Kate," said Mr. Hilliard, who never troubled his head about chaperons or proprieties, "Lord Haverstock and I are content where we are. Yes, she was near upon four hundred-weight, I assure you, and——"

"I believe ninety-nine people out of a hundred detest the sea!" cried Katharine, turning away to Steven. "If I want to go at all, I must go alone. Now, what about the tide? If we start at once, should I be able to get back in half an hour or so without walking ankle-deep across more than a mile of wet sand?"

"The tide has only just turned," said Steven. "You could be out for an hour—time enough to row to Seymour tower and back—and still get a good landing-place by the Beacon rock."

"Well, then, I make up my mind. I will go!" cried Katharine, resolutely; the more resolutely because her sister's face so plainly bade her stay where she was. "Who will lend me a wrap? Thanks, Bella," as Mrs. Dering, with the worse grace in the world, handed her a plaid from the heap of shawls that lay beside Lord Petres. "Now, Mr. Lawrence, let us start. If any one likes to follow us, so much the better; if not, we go alone."

She walked away with Steven down the terrace. Lord Petres turned his head slowly—being out of doors invariably gave him a stiff neck—and watched them.

"I am sure I've seen a picture like that somewhere," he remarked, with perfect amiability, to Mrs. Dering. "Dark trees; orange sky; grass terrace; sea in the background; principal figures—graceful girl in white dress, looking up at handsome youth attired as a gamekeeper; handsome youth evidently embarrassed in his mind, and walking with his hands behind him at her side."

Mrs. Dering tried to look pleasant. "I believe I do remember some picture of the kind," she answered: "isn't it poor Queen Mary walking beside one of her jailors at Lochleven?"

"I think not," said Lord Petres. "The picture I speak of is one of modern manners, and the principal figures in it are young persons in the position of lovers. It was called 'Hearts Errant,' or, 'Hearts in Mortemaine,' or some other of those ridiculous names our English

artists are so fond of choosing, but it was a very pretty picture, all the same, Mrs. Dering."

Just at this moment the "principal figures" had reached the flight of stone steps which led down from the terrace to the shore. "No one is coming," said Katharine, looking back. "There is Lord Petres watching us," and she kissed her hand to him, "but not in the least meaning to follow; and the rector talking to Dot; and papa still intensely interested in telling poor Lord Haverstock about the pig. Now I am at liberty to enjoy myself. They are all perfectly well amused without us, and I feel I have done nothing inhospitable in leaving them."

She ran down the steps to the cove beneath the Squire's grounds, where Steven's little craft already lay, high and dry, upon the sand.

A few vigorous pulls from his stout arm soon brought the boat to the water's edge, where Katharine got in, and then, wading knee-deep into the sea, Steven pushed the boat off, and jumped lightly into his place at the instant that she floated.

"You don't mind wet feet, I see," said Katharine, the vision of Lord Petres and of his horrors among the damp grass rising involuntarily before her as she spoke. "Oh, how deliciously cool it is here! how good it was of you to come for me! I was afraid when you were so late you had forgotten all about us."

"At first I did mean to stay quiet at home stacking my hay," said Steven. "But of course my wishes got the better of my wisdom in the end, and I came——"

"Luckily for me," interrupted Katharine, a little hastily. "Mr. Lawrence, I think one must come fresh from a very stupid dinner-party in a very hot dining-

room to appreciate really and thoroughly such blessed freedom as this! Can silence ever be as golden as when for two mortal hours you have been listening to the wire-drawn conversation of six people all as heartily bored by each other as you were by them?"

"I thought you all seemed to have plenty to say when I first saw you on the terrace—you and the parson especially," said Steven, with the look which Katharine understood so well coming round his lips.

"The parson! our poor rector!" she answered. "He is so undeniably well-read, and well-mannered, and has such a musical voice, and still—still whatever he says (out of the pulpit) makes me inclined, first to contradict him, next to fall asleep. How singularly few people there are in the world who ever say anything worth listening to—are there not?"

"Lord Petres seems to me a man who would always be worth listening to," remarked Steven. "Whatever he says would always be new—to my comprehension, at least."

"Ah yes, Lord Petres, certainly," said Katharine. "I did not speak of him. You must remember Lord Petres never has anything to say to me when Mrs. Dering is present."

She leant down her head; its drooping graceful outline showed clear, like an antique bronze, against the yellow sunset; and let one of her hands dip into the transparent water as the steady stroke of Steven's sculls, helped by the ebbing tide, bore the little boat fast away from the shore. Neither of them spoke again till they were well out in the bay; then Steven rested on his sculls, and Katharine lifted up her face almost with a start. The sun in these ten minutes had sunk

beneath the horizon; the distant plantations of the Dene, the terrace, and the people on the terrace, all had become dusk and indistinct, like the scenery in a dream. The only things vivid to Miss Fane were Steven's face and the sense that they were alone under this tender flush of sky, and with the sea, beating like one vast heart, murmuring like one vast whisper of love, for their companion.

She faltered a word or two about its being late, then added something, but of a very indistinct and hazy nature, about Mrs. Dering and Lord Petres.

"Mrs. Dering and Lord Petres are well wrapped up in furs, and talking about ortolans," said Steven. His tone was changed, Katharine detected. It was firmer, less pleading than it had ever been with her before. "There is not the slightest need for you to return to them yet. I dare say I shall never ask another favour of you after to-night," he added; "don't refuse to stay out a little longer with me now."

"I—oh, I was only thinking about the side," said Katharine. "As long as you undertake to put me safely on dry land in half an hour or so it is all right. Look, there is the moon's light coming up behind Seymour tower already, just like a scene at the opera, as Dot says, when she means to be unusually complimentary to nature."

She spoke lightly; yet there was something in her voice that might have told an acute observer she was not thoroughly at her ease. Steven, however, did not seem to notice it.

"We will keep in the course of Seymour tower still," he said, after a few minutes' steady rowing; "then drift with the back-current round to the slip at

Ashcot. You have never seen my house and garden from the sea, Miss Fane? Well, I've a fancy to take you there—a fancy that you should walk once round the old garden with me to-night. Will you come?"

Katharine took out her watch, the hands of which it was already too dark to distinguish. "If I was quite sure about the tide," she began—

"—Oh, I undertake everything about the tide," interrupted Steven, quickly. "I promised to land you at the Beacon rock, and so I will. You will be at many more dinner-parties," he added, "but such an hour as this may never come to me again, remember, while I live!"

It was a glorious hour; earth, sea, and heaven bathed in such subtle minglement of the hues of day and night as living painter could never be rash enough to imitate. Across the dawning moonrise floated fleecy vapours, sun-tinged from the west; on the western side of Seymour tower, an old Martello fort that could be reached at low spring-tide across the rocks, a deep red glow yet lingered, while its eastern outline was already tipped with silver. Delicate hosts of pearl and crimson covered half the sky. Within shelter of Clithero bay a fleet of fishing-boats lay so motionless that not a ripple broke their long reflections. The polished water rose and fell against the boat with a lazy rippling cadence, just one degree more lulling to the ear than the stillness of perfect calm.

As she looked back across the bay towards home, where darkness was now fast growing in the hollows of the shore, and where the ridge of fir plantations on Clithero hill smote black upon the pale primrose sky beyond, it seemed to Katharine Fane as though she

had left all gloom and night behind her for ever; as though light and hope and rosy promise for to-morrow were here, away from Lord Petres, away from everything belonging to her old life, and with Steven!

The strong back-current drifted them so easily along their course now that only an occasional stroke of the sculls was needed to keep the boat in its right track; and before Katharine could seriously reflect that they were getting more and more out of the direction of home, they were lying alongside of the slip; a primitive stone jetty which had been constructed, the Lawrences said for fishing, their enemies in old days, for smuggling purposes, but conveniently close, at all events, to a moss-grown arched porchway which opened, on the other side of the narrow road, into the garden of Ashcot farm.

Steven jumped ashore, and in a minute had made the boat fast by a chain to one of the staples on the slip; then he returned, and without saying a word offered Miss Fane his hand.

"It is hardly worth while for me to get out," she said; but as she spoke she put her hand in his, and left the boat. "I ought to be back already. Mr. Lawrence, really and in earnest, I must not be here five minutes."

"All right," said Steven, "in five minutes you shall return. I only want—a foolish fancy, isn't it?—that you should take one walk round my garden in the moonlight to-night. It's kept up in a different fashion to the gardens you are accustomed to see:" saying this he pushed open the ponderous old gate for Katharine to enter: "a different fashion, even, to what it was in my young days, but I believe I like it as it is. Thanks

to Barbara, there are no weeds at least; and homely flowers smell as sweet as hot-house ones on an evening like this."

Katharine had never in her life before been inside the Lawrence's gates; had never seen the farm garden nearer than from the five-acres, across which Steven had led her in that lingering "short cut" of yesterday. Its quaint old-world air, its old-fashioned borders, with their bushes of lavender and rosemary, their plots of tall white lilies, cottage marigolds, and sweet-smelling flox, made her love the place on the instant: for, in spite of a Scotch head-gardener and her own knowledge of Latin names, there was still a good deal of poetry left in Katharine's heart—about flowers.

"The plants I brought from America are on the other side of the house," said Steven; "but it's too dark to ask you to look at them to-night. You must turn to the left, please, under the mulberry tree—that is, if you can find room to get along."

And going on first, he held aside the dark over-arching boughs for Miss Fane to pass; then led her away by a narrow path to the end of the garden farthest from the house. Steven would sooner have confronted most things than old Barbara at this moment, and with one of the gentry by his side.

. . . . A low stone wall, some three or four feet in height: a group of laurel, cypress, and bay, overhung by a solitary silver beech: a distant expanse of sand and rock: a great star trembling through the purple overhead—When was Katharine Fane to cease from being haunted by recollections of that scene?

"What a dear old garden!" she said, her face upturned to Steven's. "What a pleasant place to dream



alone in of a summer's evening! I have always thought a great deal of our terrace at home till now, but I like this sea-walk of yours better. How still it is here! how far away we seem to have got from all the rest of the world!"

"This is my favourite walk," said Steven. "When it is lighter you can see straight across the bay to the Dene, and every night after work is over I smoke my pipe here—exactly at the spot where you are standing. Sit down for a minute or two—won't you? This angle of the wall, with the beech-tree for a support, doesn't make a bad arm-chair."

His tone had changed more and more, and Katharine's heart beat quick. "I'm afraid I shan't be able to stay now," she hesitated; "but another time, if you will let me come, with papa and Dora——"

"Another time is no time," said Steven. "Miss Fane, how can you be unkind enough to refuse me? Surely, your guests will be able to spare you for a short five minutes longer?"

"My guests? oh, I did not think of them," answered Katharine. "I was thinking, as I generally do, of myself alone."

"You have had enough of Ashcot already, then?"

"Indeed, I haven't. I could stand here looking at the sea for hours. I mean—I——"

She faltered—stopped short; and again the faint lapping of the tide, or fitful sweeps of wind among the beech-boughs, alone broke the delicious calm of the misty, sea-scented air. After a time—almost with a shiver: "How late it must be growing!" cried Katharine. "The five minutes are over now, Mr. Lawrence,

and I must really go. It is getting cold. Mamma would not like me to be out so late."

"Cold!" said Steven, who was carrying the plaid upon his arm; "why, of course, you are cold in that thin dress, and I—selfish as I always am—did not remember it before." And coming to her side he unfolded the shawl, and began to wrap it, gipsy-fashion, around her head and shoulders.

"Please don't stifle me," said Katharine, trying to laugh. "I don't want to catch cold, but I should like to be able to breathe a very little, all the same. Now, if I only had a pin—hold the plaid so, one moment, please, and I will take the brooch from my dress."

Steven obeyed her; and his obedience cost him dear. Up to this instant he had constantly resolved to bear his fate like a man; to die and make no sign. When he found himself alone with her in the boat, a sort of wild hunger to see the beautiful face, for once, by his side at Ashcot, had come across him. This was all. He had been inspired by no more insensate hope than that Katharine Fane should walk with him to-night round the old farm garden: walk there—then leave it sweet for ever by the recollection that she had trodden its paths! But now, one of those seeming trivialities which do, in fact, sway men's lives more than any result of reason, more than any bursts of violent passion, was destined to overcome him. He held the plaid where he was bidden, and as Katharine moved to take out her brooch, the soft girlish cheek for an instant touched his hand. And Steven lost his senses.

"Katharine," he whispered, bending down his head to hers, "I love you!"

## CHAPTER XXII.

*An Offer of Love.*

For a full minute she was dumb. All subterfuges, all feints, all the petty artillery of self-defence that had so often stood her in good stead before, swept away, and the voice of nature calling to her, imperatively as it calls to the hawthorn buds in April or the ripening fields in June. Lord Petres and his money; the Catholic church at Eccleston; her future diamonds; London houses; country houses; Mrs. Dering; the world's opinion;—where were they now? A flood of new life seemed to have passed into her veins. Her heart beat thick and sick with an emotion for which she knew no name; she could not reason with herself, she could not attempt to speak; could do nothing but stand by Steven, voiceless, transfixed, as one blind or dumb might stand who had had his missing sense suddenly restored to him. For a full minute, in short, Katharine Fane was a woman, happy with as natural, as honest a happiness as little Polly Barnes had felt when Peter Nash of the mill first took her red hand in his, and awkwardly whispered such poor version of life's fairest story as he knew how to utter in her ears!

With a face set and pale as marble, silent, motionless, Steven stood awaiting her reply. He was, I think, in this minute less agitated than Katharine. His confession seemed to have cut him off from all the hopes and fears, the fever-fits of suspense, which once used so to unnerve him in her presence. He was no longer her slave, dreading to speak a too presumptuous word

lest she should banish him; no longer her inferior, whose love, whose very admiration, must be delicately couched, if it was spoken at all, lest it affront her. He had given her of his best now. He had offered her as much as a prince can offer to a woman, and her superior, at least for this one minute out of their widely separated lives, he stood and waited for her answer.

It came: in a voice unlike her own, certainly, but with calm unfaltering accents, in irreproachably dignified words: Mrs. Dering herself could scarcely have chosen better ones.

"And this, then, is the return you make! after all the friendship that there has been between us!"

"It was never friendship," said Steven, "you know, as well as I do, that it was never friendship. From the moment I saw you I loved you, and you knew it."

"I—I had hoped of late," stammered Katharine, the firmness of his tone not aiding her self-possession, "I had hoped, day by day, that you were getting the better of your first madness——"

"Hoped! you have seen, day by day, and hour by hour, that my love for you has gone on increasing!" he exclaimed. "I never tried to hide it. I couldn't have hidden it. It has become part of myself. I've no life but in you. You are in my work and in my sleep. Your face is before me always. I never thought to tell it you till a minute ago, but I'm glad I've spoken. It was due to you and to myself. Katharine, do you reject me?"

He had not moved from her yet, his pleading face was close to hers in the moon-light, his hand still

touched—trembling as it touched—the plaid that she wore.

“Reject—*reject you!* Mr. Lawrence, do you know of what, do you know to whom, you are speaking?”

She drew herself away from him coldly. The word “reject,” had bared abruptly to her the enormity of Steven’s offence; the blackness of the gulf on whose brink she had for a moment vacillated. His confession had not been a mad involuntary outburst of adoration, a cry wrung from his lips in defiance of his reason and of himself. It had been a deliberate avowal that an equal might have made her, demanding an especial answer, a “rejection.” Steven Lawrence, let the truth be told, had asked her not to walk upon his peasant heart, but to love, to marry him! This was the pass to which her socialism, her quixotic, too-generous contempt for difference of rank and birth had brought her.

“I remember everything,” said Steven, “I am in soberer senses at this moment than I have been for weeks past. I speak of love. I offer you, Katharine Fane, my love, and I am waiting here for your answer.”

Again she paused for a moment. The strange sound of that word “love,” spoken as he spoke it, softening her into pity in spite of everything. At last “Mr. Lawrence,” she whispered, “let all this be forgotten between us. Don’t force me into saying more. Let me return home now, and in a few days come and see us again and I will promise you that you shall find no difference in me. Why should you insist upon destroying a friendship that has brought such happy hours to us both?”

"It has never existed," said Steven, quickly; "friendship between a man of my age and a woman like you! Keep such terms for the men of education—the cold-blooded, smooth-tongued men of the world, to whom they may have a meaning. I want no friendship from you. I want all or nothing. If you turn from me, I never want to see your face again after to-night."

Genuine passion made his voice eloquent, and Katharine's heart rang to it. "I wish to Heaven you had never seen me!" she cried, half in tears. "I wish to Heaven you had never come among us! I can't help it all, as you know. I was bound hand and foot—bound as much as if I had been a married woman before I saw you; and when I first met you, it was under the belief that you were Dora's suitor. You know this as well as I do."

"Miss Fane, do you remember that first moment when we saw each other?"

"I—I—what is the good of talking of these things now?"

"I held you in my arms, and I kissed you. Well," said Steven, in an odd, compressed sort of voice, "I am so much to the good for ever! When you are gone, when you are married to Lord Petres, I shall still have that moment, that kiss, for my own possession."

"You are cruel to go on talking like this," she cried; "I would have given much to make your life happy, and I have only made it miserable." Her voice choked.

"Do you care enough even to be sorry for me, then?" he said, coming closer to her side again.

"I do," cried Katharine, raising up her face to his. "I like you as much as in my position it is right for me to like any one. Be just, Mr. Lawrence. Have I not been straightforward with you throughout? Didn't you know from the first that I was engaged? Have I not—has not Lord Petres spoken to you openly of our engagement?"

"It is an engagement without love on either side," said Steven, bravely; "an engagement that it would be honestest to break than to hold to. Do you think, if I believed otherwise, I should be saying what I say? Do you think I would have tried to come between little Polly Barnes and the lover she married on Sunday? Why, I call a man less than a man who, for his own passion's sake, would seek to win the love that belonged by right to another? But love has no place in your engagement. Lord Petres is to give you his money, his name; and you, your youth, your beauty, yourself—God! what a bargain—in return! It is a barter, and a dishonouring one. If you were to go to-night to Lord Petres, and tell him you wished to be set free, he would release you frankly and hold you blameless. So much I know of him."

Had Steven been deliberately trying to steel Katharine Fane's heart against himself to the uttermost, he could not have found words more fatally fitted to the purpose than these that, in his supreme ignorance, he had lighted on. A woman of her nature can forgive most things sooner than the assumption that a lover she has accepted *could* give her back her freedom "frankly."

"You speak as I might have expected," she cried, with a tremble born rather of anger than of weakness

in her voice. "You speak as I might have expected you would do, now that, for the moment, you feel me to be in your power. Lord Petres is a true, loyal-hearted gentleman, whose faith to me is as staunch as mine to him. How should you understand him, or the feeling that he bears towards me? If—if Lord Petres were to offer me my freedom, as you say, I would not take it. If I had never seen Lord Petres—if I was unbound by any promise whatsoever, I would not stoop to listen to your suit. Now you understand me?"

"I do," said Steven, slowly and distinctly; "the Lord help me! I do understand you at last. To lose you is the bitterness of death, Miss Fane; yet, perhaps, to have gained you had been worse for me. You would never have learnt the meaning of my love. You would never have known what to do with a heart filled as full as mine."

She was silent: anger, pity, remorse, resurgent love, each struggling for mastery in her breast.

"After to-night, it's not likely you'll see very much of me again," said Steven, after a minute that to Katharine was an eternity had passed in silence, "so I'll make no excuse for troubling you with one question now. *What* has been your object—your pleasure, in leading me on to this? Some day, when I'm able to look back quietly to it all, I should just like to have so much made clear to my mind."

"I never tried to lead you on," she faltered. "Tell me of one word, of one look of mine that has ever misled you?"

"Tell me of one word, or of one look, that has not misled me!" said Steven. "You knew from the



first what I was—how ignorant, how utterly your inferior in every way. You knew—yes, from that night at the theatre, when you wore the flowers I had sent you, when you advised me, calling yourself my ‘friend,’ to come often to your house—you knew of my love for you just as well as you know it now. And still you kept me at your side, still, day after day, you asked me to your house. Why, yesterday——God, the fool that I am to remember it all!” he broke off abruptly—“fool that I am to speak of it! Why have you brought me to this? to gratify your vanity, the only real strong feeling that you are capable of, and to amuse yourself by looking on hereafter at my ruin!”

“Your ruin!” she repeated, under her breath. “Oh, Mr. Lawrence, I implore you not to speak like that.”

“I speak the truth,” said Steven, sternly. “These few weeks in which I have lived through a fool’s heaven at your side have ruined me. How do you suppose I shall go back to my old life—to my work, to my equals—and you lost to me?”

“You—you speak with passion now,” she answered sadly. “In time you will find some one fitter—worthier of your love than me, and——”

“And I shall love you, and you only, till I die,” said Steven, with a sort of sullen triumph. “Whatever becomes of me, and of you, Miss Fane, remember what I have said to you to-night. You have ruined me. It had been better for me I had never been born than have lived to see your face! and I will love you till I die. Now do you wish to go? Unless I get the boat off at once,” he was speaking just in his accus-

tomed way again, "I shall not be able to land you at the Beacon rock as I promised."

Without waiting for her answer he walked back along the path by which they had come, holding away the boughs for her as he had done before when they reached the gateway. Then, neither of them speaking a word, they returned, side by side, along the moonlit silent jetty to the boat.

A heavy dew had fallen since the sun went down, and Steven took off his jacket and laid it on the wet seat for Miss Fane. "No, indeed, Mr. Lawrence," she cried, when he had helped her into the boat, "indeed, I will not be so selfish. I could not think——"

"Sit down," said Steven, in the half-imperative, half-pleading tone that from the first had made its way so straight to Katharine's heart. "A sprinkle of English dew isn't going to hurt me. I'm not quite so sensitive as that!"

Then he laughed—a laugh that it was cruel for her to hear; and taking up the sculls, pulled as straight as the fast-ebbing tide would let him towards the Beacon rock.

It was brilliant moonlight now. The shallow sea glimmered and paled like one great sheet of changing opal among the half-bare rocks. The boat as it glided on left a glittering track of emerald white upon the water; the voices of a band of village people, getting ready for midnight sand-eeling, came to them ever and anon in pleasant murmurs from the shore; an accordion rudely played by some fisher-lad's hand seemed, at this distance, and silvered by its transit across the bay, to make actual and pathetic music.

"What a good world it is!" said Katharine, almost

involuntarily, after a long unbroken silence. "How easy it ought to be for people to live happily in it! Mr. Lawrence, I feel—oh, I do feel so miserable for having spoken to you as I did! Let us be friends again!"

Steven stopped in a moment at the sound of her voice. He drew his sculls within the boat, leant forward and looked at her steadily. There was an expression not at all good to see about the corners of his lips.

"Miss Fane, can you guess what I have been thinking about during the last quarter of an hour?" he asked her, abruptly; "what I am thinking about now? Of course, you can't. How should you enter into any thought or feeling of mine? I've been thinking . . . do you know, that we shall pass a bed of sunken rocks just before we get to the Beacon? here and there a sharp black point above the water shows you at this moment where they lie. . . . Well, why shouldn't I run the boat straight in upon them now—she'd sink in a minute—I know the exact point where many a boat has been lost before this—and so put an end to everything?"

"I don't see anything against the scheme as far as you are concerned," said Katharine, calmly. "I can't swim; you, I suppose, can; but of course as we are alone here no one would ever know that you had made away with me on purpose. Do it. I am not afraid."

"You are not afraid because you don't believe a word I say," answered Steven, but still without taking up the sculls. "You've lived your safe, well-smoothed, passionless life, till you don't believe in any strong impulse—bad or good. You can't guess even at the

sort of thoughts that fill my heart at this instant. Why, to take you in my arms and die with you as I might here——” his voice shook with passion as he spoke; “my lips to yours—is the strongest temptation I’ve ever withstood yet in my life. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you; I give you every credit for the sincerity of your wish to drown me; and I’m not afraid,” said Katharine, looking unflinchingly at his face. “I have never been afraid of madmen yet, nor am I now. We will return, please (whether you eventually upset the boat or not), to what I was saying. *Let us be friends again. Steven,*” after a moment; for the first, the last time she called him by his Christian name, and leaning forward, held out her hand to him, “I ask you to forgive me.”

Steven seized her hand; he held it, with a grip that hurt her, in his own. “I can’t forgive you,” he said. “I shall never forgive you; but I shall always love you. Don’t speak of our being friends—it stabs me like a knife.”

“At the end of a week will you come to see us?”

“I will not. I will never, of my own free will, see your face again after to-night.”

“You—you are not going to drown me then?” she asked, and tried to laugh, but ended with a little sob of pain; and Steven moved, and knelt before her.

“Miss Fane,” said he, holding both her hands within his own deathly-cold ones, “I told you a while since that you had ruined my life for me, that I had better never have been born than have seen your face! Well, listen to me now. My life was a dog’s life, I was content with a dog’s contentment till I knew you, and in loving—ay, and in losing you—I have become

a man. Katharine," he cried, with a great tenderness in his voice, "I'd go through it all—if I could choose, I'd go through it all again, the sleepless nights, and the waking misery, and the final ruin, for the five weeks I've spent with you, and for these kisses that I give your hands, only your hands, you needn't take them from me—now."

He rowed her quietly to the Beacon rock; and a quarter of an hour later, Katharine Fane, with wearied limbs, with a guiltily beating heart, was walking up through the shrubberies and across the lawn to the house. The lamps were lit in the drawing-room, the venetians and windows left wide open to admit the moonlight; and for a minute or more, Katharine, unseen herself, stood and watched the people assembled there. Her mother wrapt up in soft draperies and pretty graces as usual, with the handsome rector talking to her on the sofa; Lord Haverstock teaching, or being taught by Dora, *écarté*; Mrs. Dering still keeping Lord Petres amused with her well-trained powers of listening; all the people to whose class she belonged, and amongst whom her future life would be spent. She had returned to the region of civilized beings from that of savages: and, looking back over the sea, Katharine saw the boat that was bearing the savage, Steven Lawrence, away from her for ever, and burst into tears!

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

## An Offer of Marriage.

To estimate aright the poignance of Steven Lawrence's despair, you must remember the undividedness of his passion. Most men of the world have some counter hope, some counter interest, some counter suffering, it may be, to fly to under the first intolerable smart of a disappointment in love. Steven had absolutely nothing. From the moment that he saw Katharine Fane on his return to England until now, he had lived, unquestioning of the future, upon his madness. The whole earth to him had been sweet with Katharine's breath, bright-dyed with Katharine's beauty; and in an hour sweetness and fairness both had been wrested from him violently.

For a few days he got up and went to rest, ate his meals, did his work as usual; would not give in, he said to himself; would not let his life be altered, in any way, because a girl's fickle vanity had chanced to come across it. Then he broke down; broke down into despair all the blacker because of the pent-up feeling, the dogged miserable attempt at self-control of the first few days. What was he working for, what was he striving after? When he had got the farm back into order, what but slow torture would this round of monotonous country duties be to him? the monotonous round, which a week ago had been so full of relish! At least let him try to forget himself and her in change; any change, any excitement, no matter of what kind; the first that offered itself. Was he to go on fretting like a sentimental schoolgirl who has

lost her sweetheart? Were a high-bred waxen face, a beautiful cruel mouth, the only things worth possessing that the world contained? Because a man has lost heaven, is he to give up earth too?

It was in his old place under the silver beech (the first time he had had courage to smoke his pipe there yet) that the demon entered Steven's soul; evoked, perhaps, by some mocking vision of the waxen face, the beautiful cruel lips, that had disdained him here! The next morning he announced abruptly to old Barbara that he was going away from home for a week or so; and as he was waiting at the station an hour later, fell in, so well does chance sometimes help men on along the downhill road, with Lord Haverstock, and young Mr. Mills the horsedealer, going up to London.

His lordship was very pleasant indeed in his manner to Steven; Lord Haverstock, in truth, was never so pleasant or so much at ease as with men of a lower class than his own: made him and Mills renew their old acquaintance, asked him what he was going to do with himself in London: finally proposed, when they were in the train, that Steven should go down with them and see the cup run for at Newmarket, and that they should all three "make a week of it" together.

They made a week of it; and Steven came back to the farm late on Saturday night, flushed with wine after dining at Lord Haverstock's, the holder of a considerable sum of Lord Haverstock's money, also of the opinion, that to see a little of life, and to be in the society of other men, was all that he wanted for his cure. Heartbroken! What man of sense cares for anything but himself, and for his own pleasure now-a-

days? Had Miss Fane a softer hand, a pair of rosier lips, than scores of other women, less difficult to please? And he woke next day to feel that he had been talking blasphemies; woke, and as he looked in the red dawn towards Katharine's house, knew, unworthy though he was! that he did but love her the more for this background of the last few days against which her pure girl's face shone in such unutterable contrast.

He went to Shiloh as usual that morning, and when the congregation came out of chapel found himself received with more than ordinary warmth by his different acquaintance. That Steven Lawrence, like young Josh, was going as straight as he could go to the mischief, was an opinion that during the past week had been promulgated pretty freely among the elders of the congregation over their last friendly glass of spirits-and-water together of an evening. Still, human nature being much the same in this primitive village as elsewhere, the fact that Steven Lawrence had "taken on" with Lord Haverstock, been with him to Newmarket, dined with him at Haverstock last night, added quite as much to Steven's social and personal popularity as it took away from his spiritual reputation—among the female members, at least, of Shiloh. It was no wonder the family at the Dene had asked him there so often. My lord himself didn't look half so much the gentleman as Steven—no, nor was half as fine or handsome a man either. And coming out of chapel pretty Miss Mason the builder's daughter and leader of Shiloh society bade her papa in a whisper invite Steven Lawrence to "tea and supper" with them after service this evening.



Steven accepted the invitation and went. Why, he asked himself, should he remain longer aloof from these people who by birth and education were his peers? Was it true, was it manly pride to hold himself above the class who would receive him as an equal and, mourning for Katharine Fane in his heart, become a hanger-on, as Josh had been, of Lord Haverstock's, a companion when my lord wanted him on a racecourse, or to drink and play cards with men like Mills at Haverstock in the absence, of course, of my lord's own friends? Here were simple, honest-hearted people who had been his father's associates and were more than good enough for him. Here was a fresh village girl, with the beauty at least of youth and good-humour on her face, and who would make just the sort of wife that Klaus had told him he must choose to mind his house, and bring up his children, and set a dinner before his friends at Christmas.

He went, he forced himself to take interest in the small village gossip with which Mrs. Mason and her daughter enlivened old Mason's prosy village politics at the supper-table. He forced himself to admire Lucy Mason's black eyes and rosy cheeks and bright blue ribbons, and boarding-school manners, and next evening, half by accident half by tacit appointment, met the girl and walked with her for an hour or so in one of the lanes near Ashcot, when his work was done.

As he was loitering at her side, Miss Mason, in bluer ribbons than ever, looking up with all the village coquetry she was mistress of into his handsome face, Katharine Fane and the Squire rode by them quickly

on horseback, and as they passed Katharine turned and bowed gravely to Steven. She looked pale and out of spirits, he thought: her face seemed to have lost its youth since he saw her last. And late that night, hours after Steven Lawrence had quitted poor Lucy Mason with a cold good-night at her father's door, a man's figure was seen by some of the servants at the Dene stealthily making its way from the shore to the terrace, then up through the shrubberies in the direction of the house. Mrs. Hilliard and Dora when the story was told next morning both implored the Squire to get a policeman to sleep in the house. Katharine, conscience-smitten, held down her face, and in the course of the forenoon, after a good deal of unnecessary circumlocution, made some excuse for asking her stepfather if he did not think it would be well for him to ride round to Ashcot soon to call on Steven Lawrence?

"Something, I think, must have hurt his feelings, papa," she said; "perhaps he was annoyed we did not ask him to dinner, when Lord Petres and Bella were here, that—that evening you know, when I went out in his boat. If you were to call, and say we hope to see him again soon?"

"I'm going to call at Ashcot this very afternoon, Kate," said the Squire, unconsciously: "Macgregor wants to have a trial of that big roller of Lawrence's, and I'm going over to ask him for it. As to thinking the young fellow could expect to dine here with our friends," added Mr. Hilliard, "'tis nonsense, Kate, and the sooner he gets such false views out of his head the better. The lad's a good lad—won't be improved by taking up with Lord Haverstock, though—and he

knows his way to the Dene without my telling it him. I suppose, if the truth's told, Miss Dora put on some of her fine French airs with him the other night, and choked him off a bit."

When the Squire came back late in the afternoon to dinner, Katharine, as it chanced, was lingering, a book in her hand, in the avenue, and ran forward, eagerly, to speak to him. "And what did he say, papa?" she cried, when Mr. Hilliard had done telling her some piece of country news that he had heard in the village.

"What did who say?" said the Squire. "Oh, Lawrence! why, he'll lend it me, of course. Between ourselves, I don't see what he wants of it, Kate, with a bit of a grass-plot like his; but 'twas one of young Josh's foolish fancies. I dare say, if Macgregor likes the roller, Lawrence wouldn't refuse any reasonable offer I chose to make him for it—what do you think?"

"I? Oh, papa, I think it would be much better to borrow it. He might be offended, you know, if you were to talk about payment. Did—did Mr. Lawrence say when he was coming to the Dene again?"

"He said nothing about the Dene at all, Kate. He's very much taken up about his hay. It was stacked hastily, and, I tell him, half of it stands as good a chance as ever I saw of firing."

"But he was just the same as usual to you, papa?"

"The same? Why, bless my heart, Kate, what fancies have you taken up now!" cried the Squire. "Of course the man was the same. One would think, from your face, I had gone to borrow a thousand

pounds of him instead of a rusty old roller. He seems in very good spirits, in spite of his hay, and tells me he won a nice little sum down at Newmarket. Better stick to his farm, I say; but that's just the way of the Lawrences—if they don't ruin themselves in one way, they will in another. Where's Macgregor, I wonder? I must tell him to send James over for the roller this evening."

Taken up about the firing of his hay; in good spirits over his winnings at Newmarket! And she had been weak enough to think that his face looked changed and haggard; that he was haunting the Dene like a despairing melodramatic lover at midnight; that his dissipation at Lord Haverstock's, his flirtation with Lucy Mason, were attempts to get away from himself, and from the pain that *she* had brought upon him. Katharine hardened her heart against Steven on the moment; even put in a small joke about him and Lucy Mason in a letter she wrote to Lord Petres that night; and a day or two later, when she met him again—Steven alone, the rector at her side now—gave him a heartless little nod and smile, just as she would have done to Lord Haverstock, or any other thoroughly indifferent person of her acquaintance, and passed on.

The play was over, then, at any rate, thought Steven, bitterly, as he heard her laugh, in answer to some remark of the rector's, after they had gone by. Over; and an excellent good thing for him, too! As long as she hid her indifference, she might have kept him; yes, with only such a pale grave smile as she gave him the other evening, bestowed at ever such niggard intervals. She had paraded her heartlessness

now—paraded it before his successor, the white-handed, soft-tongued parson fop; and he detested her. She innocent! she pure! she, as he had once dreamed, above all other women, whose glory—whose shame—it was to win one man's heart after another, listen with down-cast eyes, give liberal smiles to all; and her love, if, indeed, a woman like that were capable of love, to none.

He spent that evening, not as he usually did now, at Haverstock, but with young Mills, and some of Mills's friends, at the village public-house; drank with these men, talked with them, agreed in their views of life, sank himself altogether to their level. Then next morning, came the inexorable reaction again; the aching head; the aching heart; the loathing self-contempt; the love, purer, stronger, after every attempt to bring it to a shameful death!

The story is trite, and I do not care to linger over its details. Can you imagine how a piece of tapestry fashioned by some weaver smitten with sudden colour-blindness would look—all the bright hues there, cunningly woven, but jarring and dissonant? Something like this was Steven's state now. Youth, energy, capacity for enjoyment, every fairest material of human happiness, still his; but no purpose, no coherence running through it all! Love was stricken; and with love the gist, the meaning, the pattern of his life, seemed abruptly to have vanished.

The year ripened to its prime. Golden harvest weather shone on and around the old farm house (as Katharine had seen in her dream!), and one sultry noon as Steven was coming back to his dinner, his hands in his pockets, his face moodily downcast as

usual, Dora Fane stood suddenly before him in the path. It was impossible for him to retreat, as he had more than once done before Miss Dora Fane, of late. The lane was a narrow one, with high hop-grown hedges upon either side, and when Dot first appeared to him, jumping down from a bank, where, in accordance with her well known sylvan tastes, she had been sitting, reading the "*Journal des Demoiselles*," there were not a dozen feet, at most, between them. Steven walked up to her and accepted—what could he do but accept?—the little ungloved hand that was held out towards him with such friendly warmth.

"Good—good morning, Steven!" she cried, "how strange it seems to meet you! I didn't know—I didn't think you were ever going to speak to me again."

Dot was looking wonderfully young and pretty to-day, in a simple cambric dress, and with a broad Leghorn hat, natural poppies and corn flowers childishly adorning its crown, to shield her complexion. Her lips trembled, and something very like tears made her eyes soften, as she looked up at Steven; even her voice did not sound discordant to him, as it once did, now that his memory was fresh with images of Miss Mason, and young women of Miss Mason's class, not of Katharine.

"Do you know how long it is since you have been to see us?" she ran on, as Steven stood, awkward and silent, but holding her hand, not without kindly pressure, in his. "Two months exactly, and never a word from you to say if I had offended you, and the last time you were there—do you remember? that night when all those people were on the terrace, we parted

just as good friends as we had ever been in our lives!"

Steven dropped her hand, and turned his head quickly aside. That last evening; those people on the terrace; Katharine's smile of welcome; their parting at the Beacon rock; all had come back upon his memory in an instant with such cruel sharpness!

"It was impossible for me to come to the Dene any more," he exclaimed. "Surely, you know that, Miss Dora? Surely you know that I wouldn't have slighted you, or—the Squire without cause?"

"I *know* nothing, but I have guessed enough—enough," cried Dot, with a little gulp, "to make me utterly miserable! Steven, I should like to hear that you free me from blame in all this? I never thought—I never could have suspected——"

Her voice broke down, and the sight of her quivering lips, the familiar sound of his own name from her lips, touched Steven's heart. "I accuse no one but myself," said he, kindly, "and you least of all, Miss Dora. You were only too good to me from the first!" And indeed his conscience smote him as he looked down at this poor little artless creature, and thought how absolutely she, and her friendship for him, had passed out of his recollection during the madness, the misery of the last two months.

"Well, I shall never hold myself quite innocent," said Dot, and, to show how nervous she was, she began to dig hieroglyphics with the point of her parasol in the dust. "If I had not, in my stupidity, sent you the wrong photograph you might never have returned, or you would have returned with no thought of *us* in your mind, and all this wretched misunder-

standing might never have happened. Now mind," she went on quickly, "I've nothing at all to go upon but my own suspicions, Katharine has never mentioned your name to me since that last evening you were at the Dene. I only guess, and, as I told you, I can't hold myself innocent, and I have longed—yes, Steven, I have longed," and here Dora Fane's emotions fairly mastered her, and two great tears rolled slowly down her cheeks, "to hear you say that you forgive me before I leave Clithero—before you bid me good-bye for good!"

In fairness to Dot it must be said that her agitation and her unhappiness were not wholly feigned. A letter written, in excellent spirits, by Mrs. Dering had given them tidings yesterday of the approaching marriage of Clarendon Whyte to an East End heiress; and, as much as it was in her nature to mourn, Dot, during the last twenty-four hours, had mourned over this infidelity of her hero's. The tears and the agitated voice were not wholly feigned; neither had she, of malice aforethought, waylaid Steven with the intention of making a last appeal to his pity or his pride. She had come out because she knew that even to walk alone in dull country lanes was better for her to-day than to sit at home fretting over the thought of Mr. Clarendon Whyte, and of his rich bride; when she got within sight of Ashcot, had felt, as she never had felt before, that she might have found a welcome asylum, but for Katharine, under its roof. And then, certainly, she had perched herself, not without deliberation, upon the bank by which she thought Steven Lawrence would pass on his way from work; had given him no chance of escape when she saw him approach; and now was



shedding tears, and murmuring out her little nonsense about his "forgiveness" as prettily as she could, with the object of softening him. There was just the mixture of chance, and truth, and artifice in it all, which had brought about the turning-point of many a worthier life than Dot's. She was very sincerely miserable; and she sincerely wished Steven to say he forgave her—and a great deal more! and (during the last minute and a half) she *had* formed a resolution of leaving Clithero. No wonder, as she believed herself, that Steven believed her, and softened. He was, he could be, about as much in love with Dot as with the flower-girl to whom he had given half-a-crown the day he landed at Southampton. But there is room for a great many tender feelings in a man's heart besides actual love. Dora Fane was a pretty woman, although she was not Katharine; a pretty woman murmuring soft words of liking and pity towards himself, and big tears were rolling palpably down her cheeks, and her lips quivered; and Steven's bruised heart longed passionately for any sympathy, any pretence even of pure love, in the desolate life that he was leading.

"Good-bye?" he said, in a low voice; "and why good-bye? Why are you to leave Clithero? What new arrangement is all this?"

"It is my own wish that I should go," said Dora, sadly. "No one but myself had anything to do with it. When—when Kate is married;" her eyes were down-cast still; but she could tell that Steven changed colour, "it would be loneliness greater than I could bear to live with aunt Arabella, so I mean to go out as a nursery governess. I am not clever, but my French, I think, will get me a situation, and I'm good

at my needle, and Mrs. Dering will help me among her friends."

"When?" asked Steven, abruptly. "When is it to be?" He could get out no more; and Dot knew well enough what question he wanted to ask.

"Oh, not till after the wedding," she answered. "I should prefer, myself, to go now, but Kate would not hear of it, and of course I wouldn't like to go counter to her in anything, dear child. Lord Petres is drinking the waters at Vichy, better, he writes word, than he has been for years past; so I don't suppose there will be anything to prevent the marriage taking place in November. After that I shall go. But why do I trouble you with my affairs?" she interrupted herself; "how sweet the dear old farm looks!" and she turned to a gap in the hedge through which, as it chanced, the dear old farm was not visible. "How well I shall remember all the familiar scenes, the fields, and the beach, and—and everything;" rural detail was not a point on which Dot was strong; "when I am gone."

Steven Lawrence 'stood for a minute or more irresolute. Dimly it was breaking upon him that perhaps he had treated Dora Fane badly; that, in his blind passion for Katharine, he had ignored the possibility of the poor little humble cousin's caring for him; the poor little cousin who had been his friend, had treated him like an equal from the first. He hesitated; his whole future life trembling in this minute's balance; then Dora half turned as if to go, and held out her hand to him. "Good-bye," she faltered through her tears.

But Steven kept her hand closer in his. "Miss

Dora, I've a mind to say something to you, yet I fear—I fear to offend. You know what I can offer," he went on, a sudden flush of brightness on her face emboldening him. "I don't deceive you. I have loved your cousin Katharine," her name came out without an effort, "as much as a man could love a woman so high above his reach, and of course there are things one doesn't get over in a day. If you could be generous enough to forget this—if Ashcot wouldn't be a home too humble for you—I would try, before heaven, I would try to make you happy there!"

She gave a little cry of surprise; she fluttered and trembled; then made a pretence of drawing her hand away from his. "This is too sudden, Steven! You have spoken like this from pity—from impulse."

"No, I think not," said Steven, in about as unlover-like a tone as could be imagined; "I speak altogether without impulse, Miss Dora. You are not over happy, I think. You talk of going out into the world among strangers, and I ask you, knowing this, if you will accept Ashcot as your home. Be sincere with me," he added, with something more of passion in his voice. "Let there be no further mistakes between us. Don't take me, for God's sake, if your heart says no!"

"And if my heart does not say no!" cried Dot, breaking into a smile that made her almost look a girl again. "And if, in spite of the unflattering way you ask me, I do take you, sir?"

Her face was upheld to his; but Steven entirely forgot what most men remember to do under such circumstances. "I shall try my best, Miss Dora," he said, with perfectly earnest humility. "There are things one doesn't get over at once, you know, but I

shall try always to give you the first place in my heart, and to make you happy."

So the dreary parody was played out, and they were engaged.

"And the thousand pounds will be my own, to do what I like with," thought Dot, as she was walking home—"a thousand pounds of my own, and Uncle Frank will give me my trousseau, and I'll go to Paris for my wedding-trip. Dear, honest, worthy Steven! of course I shall love you, and no one else in the world. Tra-la-la, tra-la-la! the prison bonds are burst at last!"

And the fickle creature sang aloud, and almost danced for happiness along the lanes which, a couple of hours before, she had traversed, heartbroken! Winter, and Ashcot, and life alone there, beside the dull farmhouse hearth, with Steven Lawrence, seemed all a hundred years off to Dot's mind. Her wedding finery; a fortnight, a month, perhaps, spent in Paris; Parisian dresses, Parisian bonnets, were the visions that her spirit saw. I will do her the justice to say, that in these delightful dreams the false face of Mr. Clarendon Whyte was, for the moment, forgotten.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

Old Barbara speaks her mind.

DINNER had been long ready, and Barbara had been fretting herself sorely about seeing good food spoilt—"as if there wasn't waste and ruin enough in the world already without that,"—when Steven, three-quarters of an hour later than his usual time, entered the kitchen.

"A quarter to two," said old Barbara, without

deigning to look round at him, "and the bacon was boiled to a turn, and the beans got the butter put to 'em, as the clock struck the hour. It's none of my fault, Steven, if your dinner isn't fit to be set on table."

Steven threw himself down into a chair, and burst into a loud laugh. Barbara had not heard him laugh (at this hour of the day) for weeks past, and she turned sharply round from the fire and looked at him.

"Why, Steven, what ails you?" she cried, forgetting the soddened beans and overboiled bacon in a moment at sight of his face. "You look as scared as if you had seen a ghost, lad."

"And so I have!" cried out Steven. "I've seen the ghost of my old life—the bachelor life you've read me such lectures about of late! Give me joy, Barbara. Never heed about the beans and bacon: joy has taken my appetite away! Come here," holding out his hand, "and give me joy. I'm going to be married!"

A deep flush spread slowly over Barbara's handsome, dignified old face. "Steven," she said, "it's ill joking on matters like these. Marriage is a sacred thing, and cometh of the Lord."

"And who says I'm joking?" cried Steven, with another laugh. "I tell you, in sober earnest, I'm going to be married, Barbara. Will you wish me joy or not?"

"I—I don't understand these new-fashioned ways of yours, sir," said Barbara, holding back from his outstretched hand. "In my time decent men didn't go bachelors to harvest-field in the morning, and come back troth-plighted at noon! There was families both sides to be spoke to, and the Lord's guidance asked,

and furnitur' thought of, before it came to wishing o' joy and such foolishness. Why, I wouldn't wish you joy of a heifer you'd bought until I seen what stock she came of, and what good she were likely to bring you—let alone a wife!"

"Oh, the stock's a good one," said Steven; "only too good, perhaps. Don't fear, Barbara! The Lawrences haven't been used to marry beneath themselves."

"I'll warrant it's that little Lucy Mason," cried old Barbara, natural feminine curiosity waxing strong now that her first indignant burst of surprise was over. "Take and eat your food, my lad, and don't say another word to me about it. Marrying and giving in marriage was never part of my business. You'll wed where you choose, I say; and it's well for your poor mother, Steven, that she's lying peaceful in her grave! a set-up boarding-school miss, as handless as a baby, and nothing but a pair of apple cheeks for her fortune! But I'm not surprised. I knew what it would come to when you went to supper with them Masons after the services. I knew it from the first."

Steven moved over to the table, cut himself some dinner, and ate resolutely through one help; then pushed away his plate. "Im not hungry to-day, Barbara," he said; "but I'll make the better supper. I walked home too quick under the sun. Now, then," he leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head, and looked up at the old servant, who was watching him narrowly, "I'll set your mind at rest. I'm not going to marry Lucy Mason—better for me, perhaps, you'll say, if I was. I'm going to marry Miss Fane."

"The Lord save and guide us!" cried Barbara, coming up all in a flutter to his side. "Miss Fane.... Katharine Fane going to marry *you*? Steven, have you taken clean leave of your senses?"

"I think not—I hope not," said Steven, quickly; "and—and I never said anything about Katharine Fane. I have asked Miss Dora if she will be my wife, and she says, yes."

Barbara stood like a stone, her keen old eyes rivetted upon his face. "Steven," she said at last, "what's the meaning of all this play-acting, and why did Katharine Fane come and walk with you that night—back in summer, you know—if you was the other one's sweetheart all the time?"

"I was no one's sweetheart," said Steven, the colour mounting over his sunburnt face. "I didn't know you watched me so closely, Barbara," he added, with an attempt at a laugh. "I see I must be more careful what I do, and whom I bring here, for the future."

"You can do what you choose and bring *who* you choose, for me, Steven!" said Barbara, in stern displeasure. "There'll be no place for me in a house full of your fine brides and gentry. I seen enough of them at Ashcot already. Mrs. Joshua was a lady—to her own thinking—and young Josh couldn't ruin himself fast enough without having Lord Haverstock and the like to dinner, with their wines, and their oaths, and their godless gentleman ways. But he didn't do as bad as you, Steven! He didn't look for a wife among the people who ruined and despised him. One of the Fanes here at Ashcot! 'tis to be hoped she brings a good fortune to support herself on, I'm thinking."

"She'll bring a thousand pounds, I believe, Barbara," said Steven, with thorough good temper. The whole idea of his engagement, of his marriage, was so grotesque to him as yet that he could feel scarcely more excitement in discussing it than in discussing the follies of young Josh, who was dead and gone. "At least, I think a thousand pounds was the sum the Squire told me once he meant to give her on her marriage."

"A thousand pounds—thirty pounds a year if it's safely put out," said Barbara, with grim accuracy. "Enough, if she's pretty saving, to find her in clothes. Steven, lad, I never thought you was overbright, but I did not—no, I did not—think you such a down-right—"

"Idiot," said Steven, quietly. "Don't be afraid to speak the truth. Neither would I have thought it of myself an hour ago; but in love affairs most men are idiots once in their lives, they say. You've told me often enough during the last two months that the best thing I could do was to marry, and now I am going to marry you call me hard names. You're difficult to please, Barbara."

He got up from table, took his pipe from the chimney-piece, then, instead of going out of doors as was his custom to smoke, went and sat down in the broad old-fashioned sill of the open window, while Barbara, towering wrathful about the kitchen, swept away the dinner-things. The afternoon sun shone mellow across the ripening orchard and distant harvest-fields, lit up with pleasant homely warmth the new-filled rick-yard and narrow strip of herb-garden, lying under shelter of the farm gable: and, with a start, Steven's



memory travelled back, softening his heart as it travelled, to the days when Mrs. Joshua's rule had first set in at Ashcot, and when his only refuge in trouble had been Barbara, and the place in the kitchen-window where he was sitting now. Impulse—poor Steven's accustomed guide, not always a false one—bade him speak truth out to this best friend he possessed on earth, nearer than Central America, and laying his untasted pipe on the sill, he turned:

"Barbara!"

"Mister Steven."

"Come here directly, and leave off calling me 'Mister.' I want to talk to you reasonably about this engagement of mine."

She came up to his side, and Steven put his hand on her shoulder, and with gentle force made her sit down beside him on the window-seat. "What did you mean just now, when you said there would be no place for you in the house after my marriage? How could Ashcot belong to one of our name, I should like to know, and there be no place for you under its roof?"

The old servant's lips twitched. "As long as it was for you, and you alone, Steenie, I'd have done anything—you know that, my dear! The world isn't what it used to be in my time," said Barbara, "nor classes neither. Folks think more of them above them and less of their Maker, and do travel and moither, and get to the end of their money and their lives faster than in the days when I was young, and of course you belong to your generation like the rest. I laid out your father and your grandfather for their coffins, and I sick-tended your mother to the last, and Mrs. Joshua (though not for the goodwill I bore her), and put up

with young Josh's wild ways, and loved the poor lad, for the blood that was in him. But you are more to me than all of them, Steven. You always was . . . before you could stand alone you'd cry to come to me out of your mother's arms . . . and all I've got—not over much now—will be yours when I'm dead. But to wait upon this fine lady you've gone and fallen in love with . . . don't'ee ask me, Steven. I couldn't do it. She wouldn't suit me, nor me her, lad. Take my word for it."

"I am not in love with any fine lady. I am not in love with Dora Fane," said Steven, in a voice that even Barbara's suspicious heart felt was sincere. "When I came back home first I was a good deal at the Squire's, you remember. I wasn't thinking of poor Miss Dora then—the worse for me! and—well," said Steven, shyly, "I think, perhaps, she got to care a little about me. During the last two months I've never gone near the house—"

"Nay, you have done worse than going there," interrupted Barbara.

"And—and to-day I chanced to meet Miss Dora as I was coming back from work, as you know. She told me she was to go out as a governess when her cousin marries, and I thought she would be happier at Ashcot, and asked her to marry me. I mean to hold to my word, and do my duty to poor Miss Dora; but don't you turn from me, Barbara! I have heaviness enough on my heart without that."

And he took up his pipe, and began mechanically to fill it with tobacco; then held it unlighted in his hand, gazing out, with a strangely blank expression for a newly-accepted lover to wear on his face, through

the open window. As she watched him thus, some intuition, some fine sympathy of affection seemed, in a moment, to lay bare before old Barbara the real state of Steven's heart; and, with the belief that "her lad" was marrying more out of disappointment than from love, half, at least, of her bitterness against Dora Fane was, for that moment, disarmed. So much alike is the feminine soul always, and in spite of external accidents of age or condition.

"Don't talk of 'turning' again, Steven. Whatever happens I'll never turn my heart from you. There's nothing surprising to me in all this!" Nothing ever was surprising to Barbara. "The first day you came back to Ashcot, I marked how keen you was to inquire after the Squire's people, and from that night I seen Katharine Fane here in her white dress—I was up in Mrs. Steven's room, putting by the blankets and covers for summer—flirting, and gracing, and standing there with her face downcast at your side, I knew you was being made a fool of. A fine-born lady, if she chooses, may take up with a handsome lad like you, Steven, as a pastime—my lord and his cook and his physic-bottles not by!" added Barbara, with irrelevant contempt; "but if a poor girl who'd got a lawful sweetheart of her own was to act like it, we know pretty well what sort o' name she'd have to go by!"

Steven winced as if he had been stung. "Never talk to me like that again, Barbara," he cried; "I won't listen to it. You've no right to speak a disrespectful word of Katharine Fane. She came here that evening by accident. I took her out in my boat, and—and asked her to come and walk round the old garden with me, and she came. Whatever I was fool

enough to hope or to suffer was no fault of hers. She's as much above me as the light in heaven, and I knew it from the first."

"And from that night till now what have you been, Steven?" said Barbara, hotly. "You came back—on my soul I believe you came back from America a steady lad, ready to give your heart to your land, and lead a God-fearing life among your own class. What turned you against it all? what made you take up with drink, and bad companions, and card-playing, and race-horsing, as you've done? I say, Katharine Fane; and may God reward her for it!" cried old Barbara, rising to her feet, and speaking slowly and solemnly. "It's small account to such as her to ruin an honest man's life for her diversion, but there's One will give her her due yet. As to this other——"

"As to this other, Barbara?"

"Well, lad, as to this other, Dora as you call her (and a woman thirty years of age, and never gotten to her size, 'll marry a yeoman's son sooner than marry none), though I do say that you've a poor spirit to wed with any of the name, still, if you have past your word you must just hold to it, and I'll not set myself against her, worse than I can help, when you bring her home."

"And you wish me joy of my marriage, then, after all?" said Steven, with a singular sort of smile. "We've been a long time coming to it!"

"If marriage means giving up your bad companions, them and all belonging to them, I give you joy of *that!*" said Barbara, with terrible honesty; "but I'll wish you joy of nought else till I know better what I'm talking about. When you bring Dora Fane home,

and I see her ways, and what fashion of wife she makes you, 'twill be time enough for wishing joy to my thinking!"

These were the only congratulations Barbara would offer; but when Steven came back from work at night, he saw that her eyes were red and swollen with crying; and, when supper was over and she was sitting quiet at her needle as usual, he put his arm suddenly round her shoulders, and, stooping, kissed her as he had done on the day of his return to Ashcot.

"You were quite right not to wish me joy, Barbara," he said, kindly. "Everything about my life hitherto has been a mistake—my marriage, for aught you can tell, will be the crowning mistake of all. As much as you and I can do now, is to make the best of it, Barbara!"

Then he went out into the starlight; and, as he smoked his last pipe on the spot where he had stood with Katharine, began to realize, with some degree of distinctness, the kind of future that lay before him.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### Tears—Idle Tears!

THE first person Dora met, when she got inside the house, was the Squire; and, drawing him back into the dining room that he had just left, she at once told the artless story of her love into his ear. "And, oh, I hope you won't be very cross with me!" pleaded Dot. "Poor Steven's birth, I know, is not what you and my Aunt Arabella would wish, but—but I could never bring myself to care for anyone else, and my ideas of happi-

ness are very humble ones. Remember the station of life in which you first found me, Uncle Frank!"

"You are a good little soul, Dot," said Mr. Hilliard, looking at her with moistened eyes; warm-hearted and generous at all times, the Squire was never more so than immediately after his excellent lunch and sherry at one o'clock: "and whenever you and Lawrence want help you'll know where to look for it. If he can give you a comfortable home, and make you a good husband, I'd as lief see you married to Steven Lawrence as to any lord in England."

"Dear Uncle Frank! my best—my earliest friend!" cried Dot, holding up her face to be kissed. "Now I feel my mind more at rest. Now that I have your consent, I feel that I dare announce my engagement to my Aunt and to Katharine."

"Oh, as to Kate, you needn't be at all afraid," said the Squire. "Kate from the first did her best to bring Steven Lawrence to the house; indeed, if I speak the truth all I wonder is you didn't know your own minds long ago. From the first day he ever dined here, I could see pretty plainly myself what Master Lawrence was thinking of."

"Ah," said Dot, drooping her head, "we have each been a little to blame, I'm afraid; each misunderstood the other, and made ourselves miserable. Thank heaven, that foolish time is over now!"

"And all that remains is for me and Lawrence to have a talk together, and then speak to the parson," cried Mr. Hilliard, as pleased as a schoolboy at the thought of having a wedding in the house. "Well, Dot, you have stolen a march upon Kate, you see, and

quite right too. Seniores priores. Miss Kate will have to be bridesmaid before she's a bride, after all."

"Dear Kate! I'm sure when once she is reconciled to the marriage, my cousin will rejoice in my happiness," said Dot, demurely. "I—I told Steven I thought he might come over to-morrow morning about eleven. Would you mind having a talk with him then? He wishes, I know, to speak to you."

"Of course he wishes to speak to me," said the Squire kindly, "and you may rest pretty sure Dot that Lawrence and I'll get on well together in what we've got to say. Go in now," he added, "and tell your aunt about it all. You'll find Kate and her together in the drawing-room, and it's as well to set the matter at rest at once."

"If I could only be sure of every one taking it as you have done, Uncle Frank!" murmured Dora, as the Squire was leaving her. "If I could only think that Aunt Arabella would receive poor Steven as you will!"

She made a better lunch than could be expected—the Squire having left her alone, to rally from her agitation as he thought—took her accustomed glass of claret, and felt in excellent spirits, and not in the smallest degree disposed to softer emotion, when a quarter of an hour later she entered the drawing-room to make her tidings known. Mrs. Hilliard, wrapped up in shawls, lay asleep over her novel on the sofa; Katharine, without book or work in her hands, was sitting apart in the bay-window that looked towards Ashcot. Her face was paler than usual, Dot thought, stopping a moment, as she opened the door to watch her: something of youth seemed to have forsaken the rounded lines of cheek and throat: there was an air of

listlessness and languor, very unlike Katharine, in the way her hands hung unoccupied on her lap. Did she really regret Steven? Had the rector ceased to amuse her? Did she want a new slave, or what? Dora walked up to the middle of the room, took off her hat, seated herself in a position which commanded a full view of both her hearers, and rushed at once into her announcement.

"I have a great piece of news to tell, Kate dear, and I give you three guesses to find out what it is. Aunt Arabella, I have important news to tell. Something I'm sure that you will be glad to hear."

Mrs. Hilliard started up, annoyed in the first place at having been disturbed, and in the next at having been asleep. Katharine turned round with a face like stone. "You are going to marry Steven Lawrence," said she.

"Brava, brava, Kate!" cried Dot, clapping her small hands together. "Now, that is what I call an intuition, a genuine bit of clairvoyance. Without a single hint, and after not seeing him for two months, I come in and announce that I've a secret, and Kate guesses it at once!"

"Then it is true?" said Katharine, rising, and coming towards her cousin, but looking whiter and whiter.

"Perfectly true," answered Dot, composedly, "I met Steven Lawrence in the lanes to-day, and he asked me to marry him, and I said yes. What in the world made you guess, Kate?"

"I have been expecting it," said Katharine, stooping and putting her arm round Dora's shoulder, "and



now that it has come I wish you joy from my heart. Make him happy, Dot!"

Then she turned from her abruptly, and went and sat down, all in a tremble, on a low stool at her mother's side. "Mamma dear," looking up with a little wan smile at her mother's face, "this—this is good news—wish Dora joy!"

"It is a great shock to me," said Mrs. Hilliard, faintly; "but poor Dora never remembers that other people have not such nerves as her own. I never thought after all these years to meet with such a return—a common farmer, and you, Dora, one of the Fanes and great grand-daughter to Lord Vereker, and——"

"Oh, mamma!" interrupted Katharine, with sudden passion, "let us forget lords and ladies, Fanes and Verekers for once! Let some one be happy in the world! If Dora cares for Steven Lawrence let her marry him, in God's name! What are all the Fanes and Verekers who ever lived compared to her happiness?"

"I told Uncle Frank about it as I came in," said Dot, "and he gives his consent, and Steven is coming to speak to him to-morrow. We shall be very poor, I suppose. That I make up my mind to. And I know Steven isn't a gentleman, and I make up my mind to that. Good marriages don't fall to the lot of every one. I must take my life from beginning to end as it comes to me, and I can't think, Aunt Arabella, that you will be made very unhappy by my loss."

"If—if it wasn't so near!" said poor Mrs. Hilliard. "If it had been even in another county, but—oh,

Dossy, Dossy, well for you that you have been spared this!—not two miles as the crow flies, and a dissenter, and everything!”

“Well, now, I really do not see how distance would lessen the disgrace,” cried Dot, in her mocking way. “You need not trouble yourself to think of me when I’m married, my dear aunt, and as you never look through the north windows you won’t see more of our poor, humble, obnoxious dwelling than you choose. The thought of my cousins’ excellent marriages will console you, I’m sure, for the shame of mine, and as to religion—nothing would be simpler than for one of our family to change *that*, Aunt Arabella, as you are aware.”

“Dora,” said Mrs. Hilliard, drawing herself up erect, and with a light Dot knew coming into her mild blue eyes, “little as I know, or wish to know, of this person, Lawrence, and much as I feel that you are lowering your family and yourself by your marriage, I pity him.”

Dot jumped up, and made a curtsy.

“I pity, from my heart, any man who is to have a temper, a tongue like yours at his fireside.”

“Ah well! men live through a great deal of domestic persecution,” said Dot; “and if this poor misguided Steven wishes to marry me, his future sufferings are exclusively his affair, my dear aunt, are they not?”

“Yes, his sufferings and yours, too, will be your own affair exclusively,” exclaimed Mrs. Hilliard, with a feeble burst of energy. “On your marriage-day my fifteen years of bondage will end. May Steven Lawrence’s affection for you prove a truer one than mine has been.”

"Amen," said Dot, piously. "I certainly shall have a poor prospect before me if it does not."

Mrs. Hilliard put up her handkerchief to her eyes. "This is my reward," she murmured, "and I accept it. Dossy—if from a better world it is permitted us to look back upon the hearts of those we loved below—you know——"

"My dear aunt Arabella," interrupted Dot, with the most thorough good temper, "don't be agitated, and don't commit yourself to any of those unorthodox apostrophes. My mother, if she is in a better world, and if she can look back from it, will see that you have behaved very decently to me—quite as well, I dare say, as she would have done if the case had been reversed, and a child of yours had fallen, a pauper, into her hands. The Fanes are not, I take it, a family overburthened with natural affections." Mrs. Hilliard raised her soft eyes to the ceiling. "Kate seems to me the only one of the race who possesses a heart at all—and hers is fitful in its action! You, my dear aunt, and Mrs. Dering and myself, all seem to me to have been cut from one block, as far as our moral nature is concerned." And Dot laughed aloud.

"I wonder you can talk like this now, Dot," said Katharine, for the first time joining in the tournament. "I should have thought you were too happy to be bitter about anything to-day."

"Bitter! who is bitter, Kate? not I, in the least. I like to be able to speak out for once—it seems to expand one's lungs after so many years of silence—and an announcement of marriage, like a christening or funeral, is, I believe, a proper time for these delightful family expansions of sentiment. Aunt Arabella thinks

I am ungrateful; I ask, what cause have I to feel gratitude towards her? Uncle Frank took me away from my bonnet-making in Paris, and I thank him, for his intentions at least, and you put your arms round my neck when I came, Kate, and offered me a bit of your garden, and your only half-crown the first night I was here, and I am grateful—no, I'm much more than grateful to you. Who else has been kind to me? Arabella took away my little pink bonnet and my white parasol—the first I'd ever had, and Uncle Frank's present to me—I never forgot that! and Aunt Arabella . . .” Dot stopped short; and two great tears rose sullenly in her eyes.

“Go on, if you please, Dora,” said Mrs. Hilliard. “You have made me very ill—I feel my palpitations beginning already—but go on! Let me hear what single charge of unkindness you can bring against me?”

“You took away my silk dress!” cried Dora, with a burst of genuine feeling, “and had it made into one for Kate. ‘Poor Dora was not in a position to wear silks,’ I heard you say to Uncle Frank. Well, I bore no malice to the child herself—I wasn't wicked; when I saw how gentille she looked in it, I kissed her little bare neck and arms; but you, Aunt Arabella, I hated you—I hated you! and I don't think I've quite got over the feeling since. I had never had anything finer than alpaca before, and I loved my dress. I sat and looked at it when I went to bed—it came from Paris; it was like a companion to me, and you took it away!” Dot's voice broke.

“I—I never heard such a ridiculous charge in my life!” said Mrs. Hilliard; “and unless you had had a

most vindictive heart, you would have forgotten it years ago. Pray, how many dresses has your uncle, has Mrs. Dering given you since?"

"All I have ever possessed, I know," answered Dot, "but not one of them has made up for *that*. That came from Paris, and so did my little bonnet and my parasol, and I was a child then, and a stranger, and fretting—yes, fretting to be back among my friends—and you took my presents away from me! Hard as she was, the Mère Mauprat herself wouldn't have robbed a child!"

"Dora," said Mrs. Hilliard, half frightened, half conscience-stricken, "you shall not provoke me into using hard words to you. Ungrateful, unchristian though you are, I will not forget that you are Theodosia's child. You talk of robbery; will you tell me who is going to make you a settlement on your marriage? who will furnish you with your trousseau? who will——"

"Mamma!" interrupted Katharine, starting up and going over again to Dot's side, "I will not listen to another word of this! Dora ought not to have spoken to you as she did, but it's ungenerous—ungenerous to remind her that she is less well-off than we are. Poor little Dot!" and now she stooped and, for the first time, kissed her cousin's cheek; "to think that you should have been able to remember a dress and a bonnet, and a white parasol, all these years! Let that first grievance and every other one be buried now. You are going to begin a new life, you—you—" in spite of herself Katharine's voice shook, "have great happiness before you, I think. Don't let the first day of your engagement be spoilt in this way! Mamma,

show that you are incapable of small pride, or small ill-feeling of any kind, and wish Dora joy."

Katharine's office, from the time she was eight years old, had been one of peace-maker; and long habit had taught her the art, of bringing the contending parties at least to outward truce.

"I never bore ill-feeling to any one in my life," sobbed Mrs. Hilliard. "I've had no thought for eighteen years, I'm sure, but the happiness of others—as to pride, God knows mine has, long ago, been levelled lower than the dust!"

Then she waved Dora to her side, kissed her in the same fashion and spirit that she had done when the Squire first brought the meagre-faced child home to the Dene, to be his wife's cross; and ten minutes later Katharine (sitting apart again in the window) heard them discussing together quite pleasantly about millinery, wedding breakfasts, white silk, and bridesmaids.

"The two Miss Ducies of Ducie, if we can get them," Dot remarks, "and Kate, of course, and I think old Grizelda Long: she's not ornamental, and she's not agreeable, but, as Arabella says, one never feels safe in leaving the Phantom out of anything. Besides, she has been bridesmaid so often that she knows exactly what to say and do, and it's a great thing at a wedding breakfast to get some one who will make the other people open their lips. I hope Steven won't want to be married at Shiloh, by the way; if he does, we must go there first, before the Ducies arrive. Now, Aunt Arabella, remembering how small I am, and everything, *do* you think white silk or satin would become me best?"

In the excitement attendant upon these momentous questions, Mrs. Hilliard's novel lay beside her unheeded for the remainder of the afternoon; and when the Squire came in he found, to his happiness, no storm of moment awaiting him.

"Your mother takes this engagement of Dot's beautifully—beautifully—by Jove!" he said to Katharine, when he found himself alone with her for a minute or two before dinner. "I can see pretty well what the thought of Lawrence's humble birth costs her, but she makes light of her own feelings, poor dear soul, as she has always done, for the sake of others. Now, what do you say to it, Kate? Why, you are looking as grave as a judge, child. Surely you won't be a turncoat to your own democratic principles now that you are put to the proof. What does it really matter whether the lad's a yeoman or a duke, so long as he makes poor Dot a good husband!"

"I—but I am overjoyed to hear of it," answered Katharine, her lips quivering over the falsehood. "From the time Steven Lawrence returned to England I thought how it would end, and——"

"And did your best to bring it on," said the Squire. "What true woman won't try her hand at match-making when she has a chance? Now I look back, I can see your finger in the pie all along. 'Do ask poor Steven to dinner, papa.' 'Don't hurt poor Steven's feelings by offering to buy his roller.' 'How are poor Steven's spirits now that he comes to see us so seldom?' Eh, Miss Katharine? you have had pretty nearly as much to do with it, I suspect, as your cousin herself."

"I? Well, perhaps I have," answered Katharine, wearily. "Oh, papa, don't joke, please!" and the

tears rose in her eyes. "All these engagements are terribly serious things to us who are the principal actors in them."

She tried at dinner to force herself into a little kindly gaiety with Dot; with a mighty effort she swallowed food enough to prevent her want of appetite from being noticed; and not till she had poured out her mother's coffee as usual, and listened to a long after-dinner talk about the wedding and the settlements, and what was to be written to Mrs. Dering, and what said to Steven to-morrow, made some excuse for getting away, and stole out unnoticed and alone into the open air.

It was chill, dull weather; a curtain of low-lying cloud shutting out horizon and sky; the sea leaden, the trees and garden plants mournful in their first yellow hues of waning summer. What a changed world from the one in which she had walked awhile since with Steven! every blossoming hedge-row in its prime, and birds exultant, and sunshine over all! She went down to the terrace, stood at the same spot by the steps where she had stood with him on that first day he ever came to the Dene. What *was* life? she thought, resting down her throbbing head upon her clasped hands. What was the meaning of this play that was going on about her, above all of her own share in it? For twenty-one years she had drifted on, eating, drinking, wearing pretty clothes, praying, flirting, and amusing herself, and had never been troubled yet by wondering if any sterner purpose than Katharine Fane's pleasure lay behind it all. In this hour of humiliation—the word must out: in this hour of acutest jealous pain—a sharpened sense of the lone-



liness, the mystery, the awfulness of her own life overcame her, and changed Katharine Fane from a girl into a woman. She was going to marry Lord Petres; about the facts of it all there was neither mystery nor doubt; and have everything this world could give her, as Mrs. Dering said—make better her prospects for the next, probably, by upholding the old true faith; and Dora was to marry Steven Lawrence, the dissenting yeoman, and live in a poor farmhouse on a barren shore. And the whole thing would be a miserable mockery, a shame, a sin! cried her heart; for she would never love her husband, nor Steven his wife; and across the great social gulf that divided them she would look back with guilty yearning, and see his face, as she had once seen it, white and passionate in the twilight, and know that her place ought to be at his side, and that her rejection of him had been a crime against nature, and her truth a falsehood, and her whole later life a hollow piece of tinsel sordid selfishness. Which spoke truth—the voice of pride, of prudence, of womanly reserve and dignity, or the voice of this new feeling which shook the very foundations of her nature, and made every old idea of happiness so pale and trite? Love! Did she love Steven Lawrence? Steven Lawrence whom she had rejected, whom she had so striven to forget, the man who in common coarse dissipation, had outlived *his* love in a fortnight, who already, won by Dora's pretty face, had pledged his word to an engagement that was an outrage to herself? Love! She ought much rather to hate him, only—poor Katharine!—she didn't. No, she could never hate him; and as she must never love him, she would try hard to be his friend, she

thought. They would be brought closer together when he was Dot's husband, and it would be noble, it would be generous in her to try and help on their happiness. Their happiness; and why theirs? cried her heart again. Why be generous and noble? Why not be happy yourself? And from low-lying cloud and leaden sea came neither hope nor answer. The shrill wind moaned like a reproachful human voice among the plantations; the first dead leaves of autumn fell fitfully around her and at her feet; and once again Katharine Fane wept (tears such as she had never shed, never while she lived could shed, for Lord Petres) for Steven Lawrence.

At the end of half an hour or so Dora came down to look for her. Katharine lifted up her head, and watched the small Dutch-doll figure as it drew near, pattering along as if the grass terrace had been a trottoir, and singing some song about "*l'amour et la folie*," with true French intonation and spirit; and, for the first time in her life, a feeling very near akin to jealous hatred made itself felt in Katharine Fane's heart. She was horribly ashamed of herself—poor Katharine! brimful of contrition and humility when, a minute later, Dot came up, seized her hands, drew herself up to her level, and kissed her. "Kate," she said, "we have not been alone together yet. Now, *are* you glad that Steven Lawrence has asked me to marry him?"

"I? Why, Dora, you know I am—"

"—Speak the truth, please, Kate. I love you much better than I shall ever love him; and unless you like the thought of our marriage, I don't see that

I need hold to my word. It isn't too late to change yet."

"My dear Dora, how can you talk such nonsense?" Katharine cried: something in the sound of her own voice shocked her! "You know very well I have always wished it. Papa says he believes I was trying my hand at matchmaking from the first. How can you talk of breaking your promise to Steven Lawrence?"

"I don't suppose it would break his heart if I did," said Dot. "We are not desperately in love, either of us, and don't pretend to be."

Every lingering feeling of repulsion towards Dora seemed to die away in Katharine's heart at the confession. "Unless—unless Steven Lawrence cared for you, Dot, he would not have asked you to marry him."

"Oh, dear, yes he would," answered Dot, unhesitatingly. "He has been miserable and moping ever since that last evening he came here. You can guess why, most likely, Kate? then seeing me to-day reminded him of—of things that are past and gone, I suppose, and in the revulsion of feeling, I believe that is the correct sentimental expression, he proposed to me. How oddly everything has turned out! After sending him the wrong photograph, and not caring a bit for each other when we met, you see we are going to be married after all. I wonder whether people—the Ducies, I mean, and old Lady Haverstock, and all the county people, will call on me?"

"I wonder whether you feel happy, Dot? That is of more account than morning visits from Lady Haverstock and the Miss Ducies will ever be."

"Feel happy? Well, I don't know," said Dot, pausing to deliberate. "I did, at first—very. You see, I made up my mind to spend my honeymoon in Paris, and thought only of getting away from home, and—well, really, Kate, I believe I danced as I came along those horrid lanes. There was the prospect, too, of my little scene with Aunt Arabella to amuse me then. But now—Katharine, I'm not as heartless as you think—now that the excitement is over, and I am settling down to the thought of my engagement, I *do* feel sorry," and Dot turned away her face, "about poor Clarendon Whyte."

"Clarendon Whyte! who is already selling himself for so many hundreds a year to a woman double his age!" cried Katharine. "What a travestied world this is! Why can't some—why can't any—two people who really love each other marry, I wonder?"

"Oh, they would be very miserable if they did, depend upon it," said Dot, philosophically. "If Steven had gained his wishes, and I mine, I daresay we should not have been happier than we shall be as it is. I like him, you understand—I wouldn't have accepted him if I had not—and I shall do my best, of course, to make him happy."

"Yet a minute ago you said there was plenty of time still for you to change your mind?"

"Only if you had disliked the marriage, Katharine. I've thought lately," went on Dot; "yes, I'll tell you everything honestly now; I've thought that something was going a little wrong with you at times, and I wasn't quite sure as to what it was——"

"Excessive weariness at the length of the rector's visits, I should say," interrupted Katharine. "Has

he been absent one day during the last six weeks, I wonder?"

"Well, very likely," said Dot, "or the heat of the weather, perhaps; you are always paler, I remark in summer. At all events, I determined I would ask you about it openly. It was possible, I thought, that you and Steven had had a serious quarrel that last evening we ever saw him at the Dene, and, if so, it might have been disagreeable to you for him to come into the family."

Was this genuine? the prompting of true and delicate affection, or only a little bit of the Gallican insincerity which was an ingrained part of Dora Fane's very nature! Katharine, ever ready to accredit other people with the highest, most generous motives, took it at its full worth, and felt more and more ashamed of her own first small jealousy.

"Dot, you and I must always be friends!" she exclaimed. "No matter whether our roads lie apart or near. Mind, that is a compact."

"Done," said Dot. "I dare say I shall not be overburthened with other friends when I live at Ashcot Farm! Arabella will be delighted—it annoys me to think how delighted Arabella will be!—to hear that I and Steven, her two *bêtes noires*, are safely disposed of, and she'll send me a sufficiently expensive present, and have too severe an attack of her old headache to come to the wedding, and then—thank Heaven, she need never see my face again! Katharine, *how* I used to hate her, and Aunt Arabella! It seems quite good to talk of it now I'm going away. My love for you, I verily believe, was really only another form of hate for them."

"Don't talk of hate to-day, Dora. All that belongs to the past now."

"Ah—the past!" soliloquised Dot, stretching her tiny clasped hands across the terrace wall, which was just on the level of her chin. "The past is already a long word for me, Kate. I'm near upon thirty years old—I hope Steven Lawrence doesn't know it!"

"You had better tell him the truth, I should think," said Katharine. "The truth on that, and every other subject."

"There I don't agree with you at all," cried Dot. "The French say, wisely, that a woman is always the age she looks. I look twenty-five, at the outside: then why *be* more than twenty-five? For, of course, Steven doesn't remember whether I was fourteen or twenty when he went to America. As to telling him the truth 'on every subject,' I can't imagine you to be in earnest. What! put a man like Steven Lawrence in possession of the charming little romance of the Rue Mouffetard and of Madame Mauprat? Never."

"There is no disgrace in the story," said Katharine. "At an age when other children played, you worked, Dora. It seems to me, Steven Lawrence would only love you better for hearing it."

"I won't try the experiment," said Dot, with determination. "My eyes have not been shut all these years, Kate. I know how good it is for a husband to believe he took his wife from a better position than the one he gave her. Naturally, Steven is like other men of his class—thinks it rather fine to marry a lady"—Katharine turned away her head impatiently; "but if he knew how my childish days were passed,

he would have a right, some day, to remind me of it. Isn't that true?"

"It would be sincere, Dot. I would never be ashamed of a thing in which no shame was!"

Dot was silent. After a minute or two: "Katharine," said she, "that remark of yours sets me thinking. I wonder what sort of woman I should be now, if they hadn't made me a hypocrite from the first—a better or a worse one? When Uncle Frank first found me in the Rue Mouffetard, you may believe I knew little of what was counted right and what wrong. He asked where we should go that first Sunday in Paris, and I said boldly, Mabilles. (I could die now when I think of it, and of his face. 'Me at Mabilles,' said Uncle Frank, 'and on the Sabbath!'). Well, we got home; and if I had been left to myself, I should have talked, to you at least, of my former life—the old house and the garden by the Bièvre . . . it was full of flowers in summer, Kate; there were little clean white steps leading down to the river—and Hortense and Delphine . . . . It was all very poor and mean, I know; and, most likely, Hortense and Delphine were not angels. Still, you see, it *had* been all my life; and when I was taught never to mention it and to be ashamed of the people I had lived among, and yet had so little put into its place, I believe, somehow—I don't know how to express it myself—it stunted me, eh, Kate! Who shall say?"

"Who shall say!" repeated Katharine; for, indeed, this question as to Dora's latent or possible good-heartedness was a hard one for her to answer.

"More likely than not, I have no inborn capacities for loving in me, as I told Aunt Arabella to-day. That

very Sunday as I was walking with Uncle Frank in the Champs Elysées, I met two of my old friends with their sweethearts in blouses, and—well I thought myself a duchess, and passed them by without recognition!" Dot laughed, with unaffected amusement, at the remembrance. "That did not show a very noble nature, did it? Still I suppose I was human in those days, Kate?"

"I should hope for every one's sake that you are human now," said Katharine.

"For Steven's sake, you mean. Well, whatever I am, I intend to keep him thoroughly in the dark about the Rue Mouffetard. 'Our little Dora was brought up in the most retired way by a dear old French lady, a legitimist, of the Faubourg St. Germain,' Aunt Arabella used to say, and that would be quite explanation enough—if he knew what it meant—for poor Steven. Now, if you were in my place, you would certainly go to Paris for your honeymoon, wouldn't you, Kate?"

"If I was in your place no doubt I should," answered Katharine, with a sigh.

"I didn't mean that. I meant where would you, yourself, go?"

"I, myself? wherever Lord Petres chose. To Paris, very probably."

"'Tis the best place on the earth," cried Dot; "above all for a honeymoon. Even without knowing a creature it would hardly be possible to get tired of each other. To look at the people on the Boulevards and the toilettes in the Bois would be amusement enough for me. It would be a mistake to get all my dresses made up until I see how they are worn in Paris, Kate?"



"I think it would be a mistake to go to Paris at all!" and Katharine gave one last wistful look across the sea before she turned away towards the house. "I should think the woods and fields around Ashcot would be far pleasanter than any crowded city in this quiet autumn weather."

"Fields about Ashcot!" cried Dot, putting her small hand under her cousin's arm. "A thousand thanks, my dear. I am to have fields, remember, and nothing but fields, till I die. At least let the dose be gilded by a fortnight of good wholesome bricks and mortar at starting."

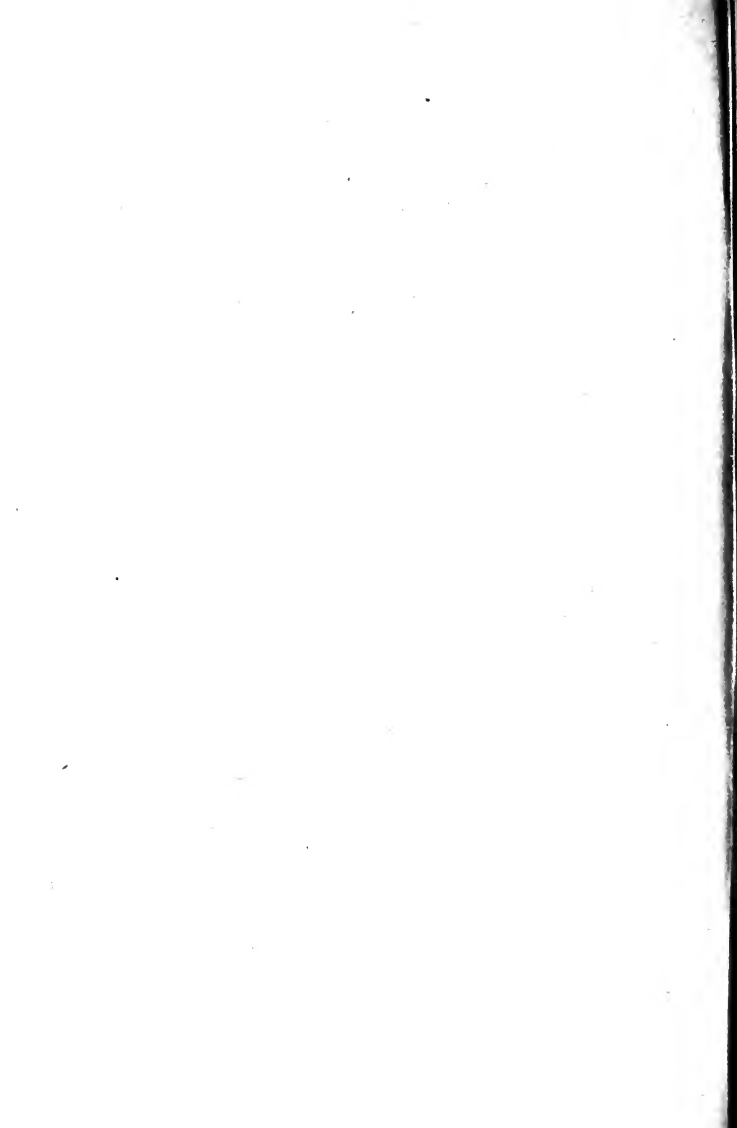
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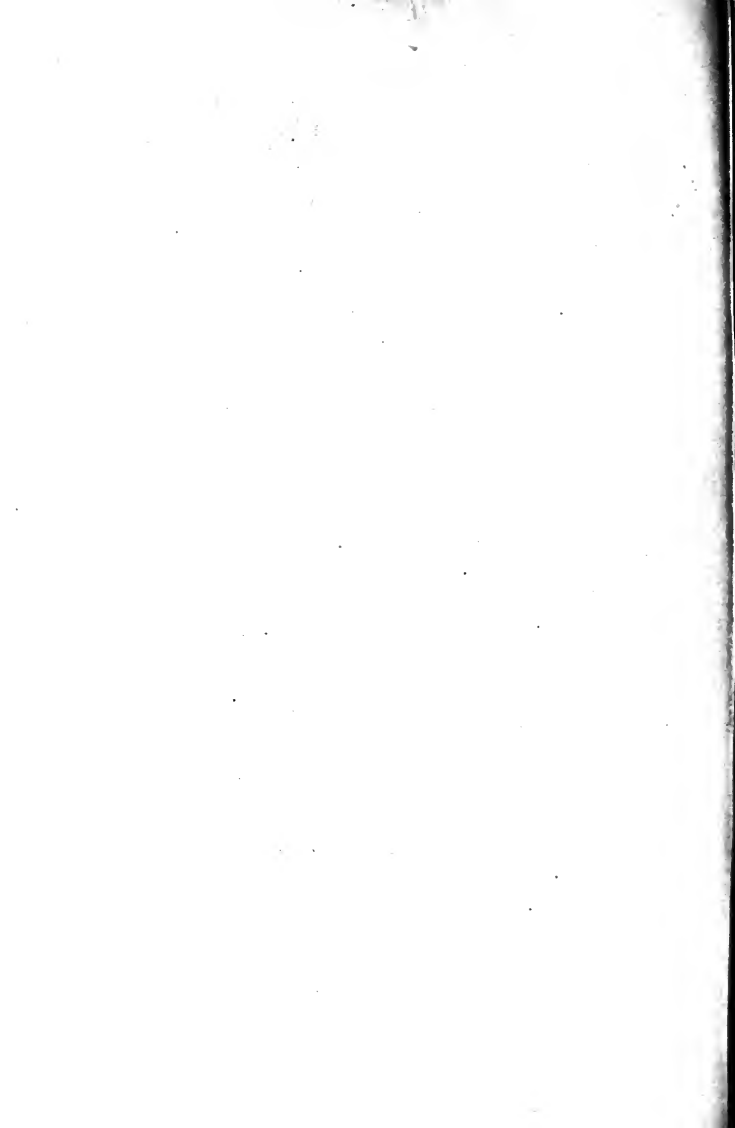
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